

# Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Editors

Janevski Ana and Marcoci Roxana with Nouril Ksenia

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Primary Documents

# Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe

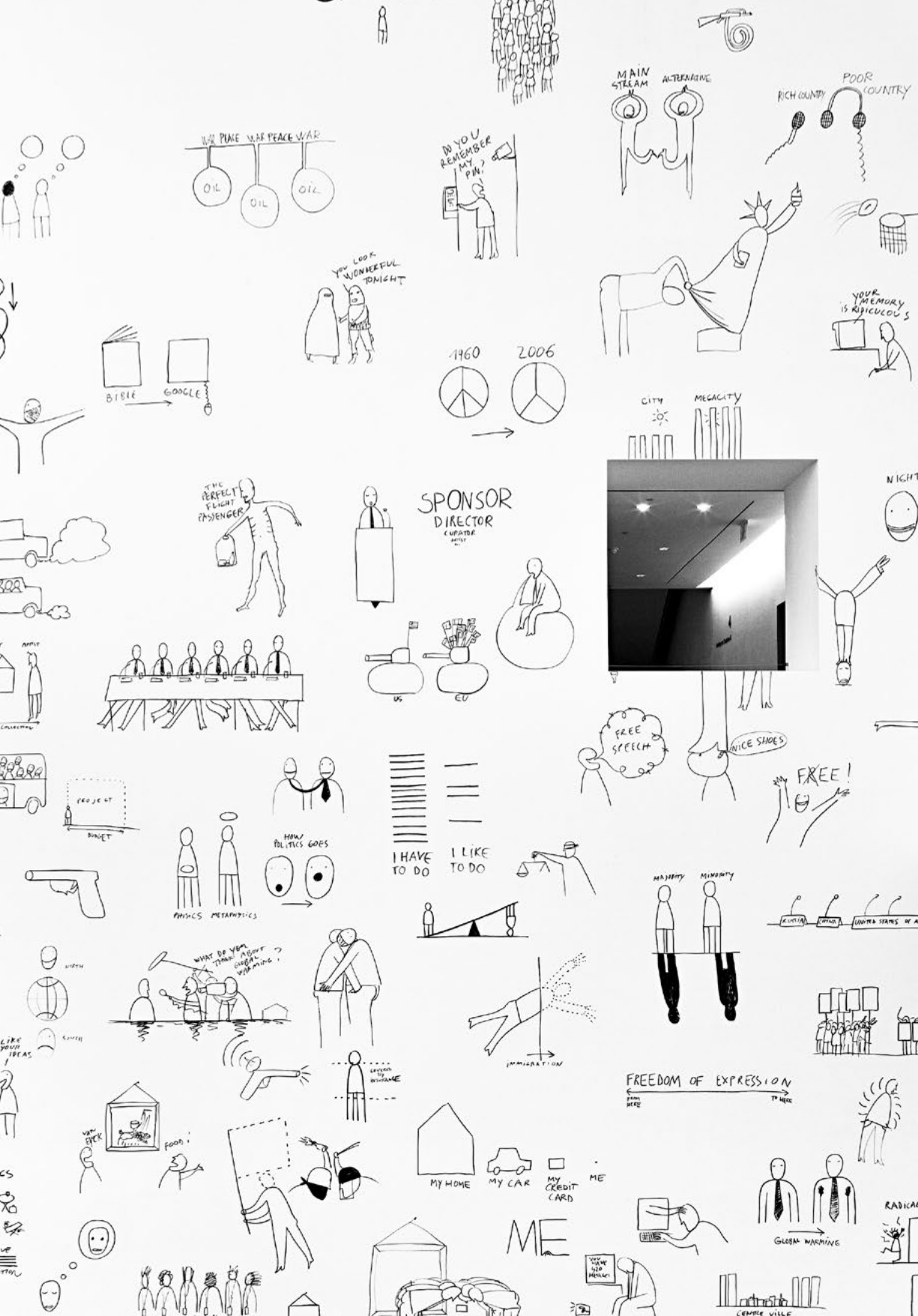
## A Critical Anthology



MoMA

**Art and Theory of Post-1989  
Central and Eastern Europe**

# CAPITALISM





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**Primary Documents**

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# **Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology**

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**Edited by Ana Janevski and Roxana Marcoci  
with Ksenia Nouril**

**The Museum of Modern Art**  
New York

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# Foreword

GLENN D. LOWRY

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8 The Museum of Modern Art's ambitious series of documentary anthologies, of which this book is the ninth, began in 2002 with *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*. That groundbreaking book, which made available to English-speaking readers key writings by artists, critics, and art historians from sixteen different countries, has been followed by volumes focused on Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil, Sweden, China, Japan, and, most recently, the Arab world from Morocco to Iraq. Published by the Museum's International Program and generously supported by its International Council and other donors, each volume has assembled significant art-historical source materials that had previously been scattered in often hard to find printed sources or, in some cases, remained unpublished in difficult to access archives. Each volume's editors determined the appropriate time period to cover and initiated the search for documents, aided by an advisory group of specialists in the field. Newly commissioned essays helped to provide context for the original writings.

While there are many countries and regions that are excellent candidates for inclusion in the series, we have especially good reasons now to return to Central and Eastern Europe, the focus of the first book. The creation of that region, described by the first volume's editors as "a concept . . . neither geographic nor social [but rather] economic and political," was an outcome of the Yalta Conference of 1945 and was intended to outline zones of influence in Europe, yet those countries soon fell under the influence of the Soviet Union and, as a result, became effectively isolated from much of the world for the following four decades. The collapse of socialist regimes that began in 1989 marked the start of a new era for Eastern Europe, one that the original *Primary Documents* volume could only briefly address.

MoMA's own engagement with this region changed dramatically in 2009 with the establishment of Contemporary and Modern Art

Perspectives (C-MAP), a cross-departmental, internal research program at MoMA that fosters the multiyear study of art histories outside North America and Western Europe. This initiative, composed of more than fifty staff members from eleven departments, is currently organized into three research groups, one of which has, from the beginning of C-MAP, focused on modern and contemporary art produced in Central and Eastern Europe. Like the others, this group invites eminent scholars, artists, and curators to lead regular seminars at the Museum according to a geographically focused curriculum and conducts research trips to build local contacts and firsthand knowledge. As this volume's two editors explain in their introduction, this book has been entirely the creation of the C-MAP Central and Eastern Europe group.

We are indebted to all the members of this scholarly research group—and especially to the book's two editors, Ana Janevski and Roxana Marcoci—for their critical work in assembling this volume. They were ably assisted throughout the project by Ksenia Nouril, formerly the C-MAP Fellow for Central and Eastern Europe and now completing her dissertation at Rutgers University, and, in the book's final stages, by current C-MAP Fellow, Meghan Forbes. We are also extremely grateful to Jay Levenson, Director of our International Program, and Sarah Lookofsky, Assistant Director, for all their tireless work coordinating the many MoMA staff members collaborating on the book and ensuring that it was published on schedule.

As has been the case with each book in the series, much of this volume's cost has been generously underwritten by institutions and individuals to ensure that it will be available to the widest possible readership. The publication would not have been possible without the support of our principal funders, led by The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art. We are grateful for the generous funding provided by The Renova Group of Companies. Additional support was provided by Claudia Quentin and by other donors.

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JAY A. LEVENSON AND SARAH LOOKOFSKY

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For this volume, it has been our tremendous pleasure to work closely with colleagues whose in-depth expertise has made possible the rich selection of content included in these pages. We are especially grateful to the book's editors, Ana Janevski, Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art, and Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, for the passion and expert knowledge that they brought to this project from inception to completion, and also to former C-MAP Fellow Ksenia Nouril, who was instrumental in the book's formative stages. Since the outset, MoMA's internal expertise was tremendously bolstered and enriched by the intellectual force and careful attention of our outside counselors—Claire Bishop, Boris Buden, Ketī Chukhrov, Boris Groys, David Joselit, Klara Kemp-Welch, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, and Georg Schöllhammer—who were also participants in C-MAP Central and Eastern Europe workshops on scholarly subjects related to the book. We are also grateful to current and former C-MAP Central and Eastern Europe group members, who were essential interlocutors through-out the process, including Kim Conaty, Michelle Elligott, Meghan Forbes, Jon Hendricks, Juliet Kinchin, Magdalena Moskalewicz, Ksenia Nouril, David Platzker, Paulina Pobocha, Christian Rattemeyer, and David Senior. They also contributed new writing for this volume. The ever-attentive oversight of C-MAP Fellow Meghan Forbes was a major help in ensuring the book's smooth completion.

Many other MoMA staff members were instrumental in bringing this volume to press. We are indebted to our Publications Department, which has been invaluable in making possible the entire Primary Documents series, and especially to: Christopher Hudson, Publisher; Marc Sapir, Production Director; Don

McMahon, Editorial Director; Rebecca Roberts, Editor; Matthew Pimm, Production Manager; and Cerise Fontaine, Department Coordinator. In the International Program, Marta Dansie, Department Coordinator, has ably managed many of the logistical components of the project and its multiple external collaborators. Todd Bishop, Sylvia Renner, Meagan Johnson, and Hillary Reeves ensured that funds were raised to enable the book's production, and Nancy Adelson provided expertise on legal questions. Interns Briony Cartmell, Lin Du, Evgenia Efstathiou, Ryan Holguin, Elena Perez, Rotana Shaker, and Naomi Falk undertook many diverse tasks at various points during the project. For their enthusiastic support from the project's very beginnings, we are most grateful to MoMA's Director, Glenn D. Lowry, and to Laurenz Foundation Curator and Advisor to the Director, formerly the Museum's Associate Director, Kathy Halbreich.

Our editor, Jason Best, attended with great care to the integrity of every text, and Beverly Joel expertly translated the conceptual aims of the project into compelling visual form in the book's design. We are also indebted to Giuliano Vivaldi for his skillful translation into English of Ilya Budraitskis's essay.

Most importantly, this volume could not have offered as insightful a view of the ways in which the world has been reshaped since 1989 without the rich and lucid articulations on the part of the authors and artists represented in these pages. We are, of course, also profoundly grateful to these individuals, as well as to the artists' families, estates, and institutions that gave us permission to include the texts and images that will make this book an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the art of this region within a global context.





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# Introduction

ANA JANEVSKI AND ROXANA MARCOCI

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*Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology* takes the historic political transformations in the pivotal years between 1989 and 1991 as its departure point. Specifically, it examines the massive changes and ripple effects that the dismantling of socialist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe had on artistic practices and critical theory of the last thirty years. This anthology follows up on the 2002 publication *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, the first in The Museum of Modern Art's Primary Documents series and a volume dedicated to writings on modern and contemporary art from this now-contested yet well-defined geographical region. Stretching from the former East Germany (*Mitteldeutschland*) to Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, the Baltic countries, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine, and parts of Russia, this territory reflects different geopolitical realities and cultural traditions, yet is loosely bound by the historical experience of socialism and the aftermath of turbulent political transition. Since the printing of the first sourcebook, a distinct generation of cultural workers, philosophers, activists, and artists has reassessed the context of artistic practices in these postsocialist countries in relation to the constitution of new democracies, the struggle for the recognition of difference, gender theories, and global transnational networks.

Comprising seventy-five primary and secondary sources, including newly commissioned texts and interviews with artists, this anthology is the result of a multiyear research initiative fueled by the founding in 2009 of MoMA's Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP), a global program focused on the study of art histories that lie outside the hegemonic models of the United States and Western Europe. While reassessing complex ideas and competing visions of modern and contemporary art, the Central and Eastern European section of C-MAP hosted a series of method-oriented seminars between 2015 and 2017 specifically dedicated to this book. In this context, the editors invited a group of scholars from both East and West to act as outside advisers and share their expertise. We had the privilege of formulating the book's discursive,

crosscultural structure with Claire Bishop and David Joselit, both of the Graduate Center at the City University of New York; independent art historian Boris Buden; Ketī Chukhrov of the Russian State University of the Humanities; Boris Groys of New York University; Klara Kemp-Welch of the Courtauld Institute of Art; Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez of L'Internationale; and Georg Schöllhammer of *springer*.

Grouped thematically into seven chapters, the texts in this anthology include case-study exhibitions, curatorial statements, monographic essays, historical proposals, critical debates, and artist interviews, originally written in over a dozen languages and published in books, exhibition catalogues, online, and in journals and magazines that have not always been available beyond their country of publication. The anthology synthesizes a wide range of approaches while probing the claims to universalism made by Western-centric cultural narratives. Each chapter is prefaced by three texts commissioned for this book: an essay authored by one of the outside advisers, which provides a conceptual framework for the respective subject; a summary of the anthologized critical texts by one of the members of the Central and Eastern European section of C-MAP; and an interview conducted with artists or artist collectives by another C-MAP member. The rich collection of critical essays that follow these recently commissioned texts covers a vast and heterogeneous field. While notable for the range of positions they reflect, most authors share the desire to contest the ecumenical version of Western modernity. In reclaiming their own histories, they offer new perspectives that underscore the significance of the socialist legacy (in particular ideas of collectivity and solidarity) as an intellectual and moral force in both local and global contexts. A salient addition to the book are the full-page black-and-white images and color spreads of artists' work. The fact that these are, by necessity, selective, and that the selection process created a number of regrettable omissions and gaps, only serves to emphasize the richness and vibrancy of the contemporary art scene in the region.

In compiling this volume, we have drawn on the in-depth research, educational programming, and travels of the Central and Eastern European section of C-MAP in order to ensure



that the publication reflects some of the most cogent and provocative writings on the subject of postsocialist transition available today. Critical to this have been our interactions with an extensive network of cultural interlocutors. A charting of this transnational network and its protagonists is included at the end of the book, offering a succinct, illuminating history of C-MAP Central and Eastern Europe's exchanges since 2010. In a time of resurgent nationalisms and xenophobic sentiment, the audacity to embrace complexity, envision future trajectories informed by multifaceted histories, and build discourses through networks of alliances and collaborations (both political and aesthetic) that refuse the primacy of borders is increasingly urgent and relevant.

"So what is Eastern European art? Is it the art that comprises the activity of artists residing in the countries that used to belong to the former Eastern bloc? Is it the artistic practices developed in the context of existing state socialism? Perhaps it is the art of the countries in which the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCAs) were active during the 1990s? Or art that thematizes the socialist or communist heritage, with a special interest in the destiny of the individual within the totalitarian regime?"<sup>1</sup> This series of questions posed by Jelena Vesić summarizes the queries and skepticism that the term Eastern Europe prompts today. During the last thirty years, numerous projects and initiatives have attempted to define Central and Eastern Europe through different comparative or critical methodologies, going so far as to dispose not only of the term "East" but also "West." The range of approaches to considering this dynamic region and specifically its art-critical contexts are reflected in the diverse texts collected here. Ranging widely in perspective across the past two decades or more, their viewpoints are varied and at times contradictory. Yet taken together, they refute the idea of Central and Eastern Europe as a monolithic bloc of oppressive regimes, arguing instead in favor of a more nuanced view, which relates as well to the role of art, both contemporary practices and those of the 1960s and '70s neo-avant-garde. Perhaps the most popular narrative of art during the socialist era is the one based on the figure of the brave dissident artist struggling for

freedom of expression in a totalitarian regime. Yet this storyline takes the countries of the former Eastern bloc for a homogenous entity and ignores their singularities. This anthology offers instead new readings that oppose simplified ideological representations of the socialist era. The goal is not to give an all-encompassing historical overview, but rather to research concrete artistic practices positioned within their given sociopolitical constellations that understand the significance of the region's common socialist heritage today.

What should the reading of that heritage be? In the first chapter of this volume, "Reckoning with History," Klara Kemp-Welch addresses this question, analyzing the varying accounts and complexities of the end of the Cold War as well as the tension inherent in such dichotomies as East/West, national/global, and center/periphery. Key to such a reckoning are the narratives of artists. Thus Katalin Ladik and Tamás St.Auby in conversation with Jon Hendricks share their experiences of both pre- and post-1989, tracing their paths of moving to Hungary in the wake of political upheaval, Ladik from her native Yugoslavia and St.Auby from exile in Switzerland.

Art exhibitions have been important in establishing recent art histories in the region, while offering new ways of approaching these histories (and historiographies). In the second chapter, "Exhibiting the 'East' since 1989," Claire Bishop outlines some examples of international exhibitions organized since the beginning of the 1990s, mainly in the West, that historicized Central and Eastern European art, exhibitions that had the support of broader political and economic interests that coincided with the process of the region's integration into the European Union. The role of alternative institutions and self-historicization is emphasized by artist Dan Perjovschi in conversation with Roxana Marcoci. Perjovschi discusses his involvement with Lia Perjovschi in working to build what might be described as a DIY art scene in Romania after 1989 and the subsequent transformations there, decrying the lack of progressive art institutions in the region and the vulnerability of those that do exist to political shifts, in particular the rise today of right-wing nationalism.

Perjovschi's emphasis on the importance of institutional structures and the process of self-historicization preludes the next chapter, "Working in and on the Archive." Here, David Joselit introduces the term "information out of

1 — Jelena Vesić, "The Annual Summit of Non-Aligned Art Historians," in Urška Jurman, Christiane Erharter, and Rawley Grau, eds., *Extending the Dialogue: Essays by Igor Zabel Award Laureates, Grant Recipients, and Jury Members, 2008–2014* (Ljubljana: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory, 2016), 32.

place” to indicate the movement or displacement of information inherent in the structure of archives, and he identifies three types of archiving processes that he sees as dominant in the region: self-historicization, surveillance, and utopian archives. The role of the artist in relation to the archive is highlighted in David Senior’s interview with artist Zofia Kulik, who formed half of the artist duo KwieKulik with her former partner, Paweł Kwiek. KwieKulik’s practice of collecting material is inseparable from their artwork, even as the archival system the artists developed in their apartment has also functioned to correct the neglect of official art institutions in terms of documenting contemporary art practices. Thus, for Kulik, the archives are a bank of images and ideas, a source of inspiration, but also a “weapon” against permanent discontinuity in art history.

If the socialist era is often characterized by self-historicization in the face of limited or absent institutional support, what happened when democracy arrived? Boris Buden’s introduction to chapter four, “After the Fall: Democracy and Its Discontents,” gives a mordant account of the dominant interpretation of the historical turn of 1989, when “democracy entered the ruin of Eastern European communism in the form of its simple immediacy.” Eastern Europe became an ahistorical, delayed “Other,” forced to catch up with the modernist developments it missed due to supposedly antimodernist communism. Buden concludes that democracy arrived in Central and Eastern Europe arm in arm with capitalism “in its most predatory neoliberal form,” creating disastrous consequences for its society. For his part, artist Artur Żmijewski, in conversation with Paulina Pobocha, sees the fall of communism in 1989 not as the beginning of democracy but as a brawl between political forces that sought to define democracy. Well known for his 2006 manifesto “The Applied Social Arts,” in which he advocates for the political engagement of artists, Żmijewski continues to warn against political inaction, particularly in the context of the rightward shift in Poland and elsewhere in the world.

How artists might act in concert together is at the core of the next chapter, “Maintaining the Social in Postsocialism: Activist Practices and Forms of Collectivity.” In her introduction, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez poses the much-debated question, “Can art seriously change the world?” She stresses how strongly the fields of culture and art are intertwined with the

economic, social, and political fields. In the context of the transition to Western-style capitalist democracy and the abdication of certain state responsibilities under neoliberal regimes, Petrešin-Bachelez sees potential for artistic action in contemporary interpretations of the socialist legacy of solidarity and collectivism. Taking its name from Lenin’s famous question, “What is to be done?,” the collective Chto Delat is an example of one such contemporary practice. Chto Delat member Dmitry Vilensky, in conversation with Ksenia Nouril, reflects on the intersections of art, politics, and activism, and makes a compelling case for collectivist art’s capacity for resistance. The inextricable relation of art and politics has been present in the work of the art group IRWIN, part of the larger collective NSK since the early 1980s. In a conversation with Meghan Forbes later in the book, IRWIN members discuss the evolution of the project NSK State in Time, which began to issue passports to its “citizens” in the 1990s and has grown to include, in the words of IRWIN’s Borut Vogelnik, “a number of exceptional, world-renowned artists, art theorists, and curators, for whom even the world’s most developed countries in this field would envy us.”

In introducing chapter six, “Deconstructing Gender Discourses,” Ketī Chukhrov parses the oft-overlooked distinctions between the paradigms of economy and production that undergirded gender constructs in both the socialist East and capitalist West, setting up the chapter’s texts, which explore the East’s sometimes uneasy embrace of Western-oriented feminism after 1989. Sanja Iveković traces her own engagement with feminism through her involvement with various feminist organizations in the former Yugoslavia and today’s Croatia in her conversation with Ana Janevski. Iveković credits the work of women’s NGOs as critical to the process of democratization and the creation of civil society. Stressing that collaboration with those organizations is essential to her practice, Iveković concludes with a sentiment that twines the chapter’s themes with those of the preceding one: “The strength of the artistic act is not only to reflect social reality but to actively participate in the creation of the social and collective imaginary.”

The notion of “postcolonialism” in relation to Central and Eastern Europe in the twenty-first century is taken up in the book’s last chapter, “In a Global World.” As the process of decolonization of the former Eastern bloc has played out in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet

Union and other socialist regimes, a discourse emerges surrounding the question of whether there is relevance to the designation “Central and Eastern Europe,” and if so, to what end? Boris Groys provides critical context here, making an important distinction between postcolonialism and postsocialism in his introduction to the chapter. While postcolonial artists and intellectuals have criticized Western dominance and exclusivity with the goal of broadening the scope of the West’s cultural institutions to include non-Western traditions and perspectives, the goal of the postcommunist regimes in Eastern Europe was the total abolition of communism. “Here again we find the strong form of censorship,” Groys writes, “but this time the censorship was, and still is, directed against the socialist component of postsocialist art and culture.” Globalization is the opposite of internationalism or universality; it is not about solidarity or shared cultural values, but about global competition, “everybody against everybody.” Economic globalization can bring extreme cultural conservatism, and today a younger generation of scholars and curators are indeed finding relevance in the former Eastern bloc’s shared experience of socialist internationalism to build transnational networks and international solidarity. At the same time, artist Hito Steyerl, in her conversation with Ana Janevski and Roxana Marcoci, proposes a scaling down of exaggerated expectations. “Maybe what art can do now is what it is best at: look, listen, and interpret with precision, imagine without compromise or fear,” she says. “Deflating art’s pretensions, its blockbusterism, its megalomaniacal delusions about its own power would be a first step.”

Even if the notion of Central and Eastern European art has been problematic, it has enabled a tremendous amount of research, which in turn has yielded important exhibitions and acquisitions for the permanent collections of major international museums, such as MoMA. In the process, it has allowed for a closer realization of the kind of horizontal model of art history proposed by Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski, one that is transnational and pluralistic, in contrast to the “Western” centralizing vertical model. Yet the question persists: how should the art of Central and Eastern Europe be presented in Western institutions, and what narratives should it reflect? This seems particularly urgent from our vantage point working within an institution considered to be a bastion of the Western-centric modernist canon. To think just in terms of inclusion within the dominant narratives or of a “filling the gaps” acquisition strategy is not sufficient. It is important to question and re-envision the canon and the consecration processes of the past, to articulate tensions and connections between artistic traditions, to revise our interpretative models, to devise cross-cultural frameworks of connectivity, and to look back with an eye toward the future. We hope that this book will trigger new reflections and fresh thinking about the hybridization of modernism and the contemporary situation, and that it will contribute to a reorganization of knowledge and scholarly research.

*Editors’ note: The texts reprinted in this volume have been compiled from a wide range of sources. In preparing the texts for publication, we have corrected errors in spelling and punctuation but have retained idiosyncrasies in general style. In certain instances where the author’s intent was ambiguous, we have elected to republish the text as it originally appeared.*

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# **Reckoning with History**

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# Introduction

KLARA KEMP-WELCH

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## **What one thinks about the meaning of the art that was produced in the countries**

of the former Eastern bloc during the Cold War and after is hard to separate from what one believes about Soviet-style socialism, about why it ended, and about what replaced it. Three decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, such questions continue to be hotly debated. To wit, the question of *who* played a key role in bringing about the end of the system remains open. In some quarters, an earlier interest in the role of dissident movements across the Soviet bloc has given way to a fatigue with narratives of historical change powered from below. Top-down accounts of the end of the Cold War dismiss the agency of ordinary citizens banded together in independent social groups, or what has been loosely termed “civil society,” in the course of historical events. Historian Stephen Kotkin, for instance, cites the last chief of the Communist Party in Hungary as saying that “the party was shattered not by its opponents but—paradoxically—by the leadership.” Kotkin concurs: “It was the establishment—the uncivil society—that brought down its own system [. . .] Civil society could not have shattered Soviet-style socialism for the simple reason that civil society in Eastern Europe did not actually exist,” further arguing that “the mostly small groups of dissidents, however important morally, could not have constituted any kind of society.”<sup>1</sup> To downplay the politics of dissidence in this way, however, is also to ignore the complexity of the various political configurations that emerged out of the ruins of both establishment and opposition groups; this complexity remains key to understanding the polarized political landscapes of many of the former Soviet satellite countries today. As art historian Éva Forgács has noted more recently: “Opposition groups were a complicated mix of liberals and conservatives, internationalists and nationalists [. . .] who would never accept each other’s long cherished or newly constructed historical narratives.”<sup>2</sup>

Among the most contested narratives are those that treat “transition” as an inevitable consequence of the superiority of the capitalist model. For Slavoj Žižek, writing in the late 1990s, it is the figure of Czech president Václav Havel that serves as an example, in particular “the tension between his two public images: that of heroic dissident who, in the oppressive and cynical universe of Late Socialism, practised and wrote about ‘living in truth,’ and that of Post-Modern President who [. . .] indulges in New Age ruminations that aim to legitimise NATO military interventions.”<sup>3</sup> The tragedy of Havel, in Žižek’s view, was that his “heroic insistence on doing the impossible (opposing the seemingly invincible Communist Regime) has ended up serving those who ‘realistically’ argue that any change in today’s world is impossible, and that there is no alternative to global capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> If Havel’s particular experience of the Velvet Revolution in his own country left him ill-equipped to respond to the new challenge posed by the

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1 — Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 7.

2 — Éva Forgács, “Between Local and Global: Double Bind and Double Challenge,” paper presented at the conference “East European Art Seen from a Global Perspective,” Galeria Labirynt, Lublin, October 2014.

3 — Slavoj Žižek, “Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism,” *London Review of Books* 21, no. 21 (October 28, 1999): 3.

4 — Ibid.

Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, any account of “Eastern Europe” after 1989, likewise, has to acknowledge the radically different social and political processes that accompanied transition in the former Soviet Union, in the different Soviet satellite countries, and, of course, in Yugoslavia. Contrary to deterministic accounts of the triumph of capitalism, both state and non-state actors played a part in bringing about the end of the Cold War in each case.

The reconstruction of local historical narratives has remained a key concern for many leading artists. In some cases, artists’ approaches to “transition” have been infused with biting irony, in others with a peculiarly entropic nostalgia—*ostalga*—that has no clear parallel in historical discourses. This may, in part, signal the homogenizing effects of performing history and identity for an ever-expanding art world. The widespread occlusion of the fundamental systemic differences among former Eastern bloc countries before and after transition, in particular between Yugoslav socialism (independent of Stalin after 1948) and Soviet-style socialism, remains especially problematic in art-historical terms, in view of the different experiences of artists in different parts of the bloc and the different orthodoxies with reference to which they positioned themselves (whether socialist modernist or socialist realist), the different rates at which official orthodoxies in the cultural sphere were abandoned, or the different attitudes to and opportunities for engagement with cultural developments abroad.

In the immediate wake of the collapse of Soviet-style socialism, “the agents of the respective art scenes [. . .] faced a near-impossible dual task: on the one hand, to construct a national narrative of scattered fragments and contradictory storylines, and, on the other hand, to keep up with the current trends and concepts of the unfolding global scene,” as Forgács wrote in 2014.<sup>5</sup> Forgács has observed that while the early 1990s marked “this region’s comeback to the international scene,” there were certain strings attached: “An unequivocal picture of the dramatic historical changes was demanded: exhibitions of ‘before and after’ [. . .] echoing the destruction of the Berlin Wall: On November 8, 1989, it was still there, but on November 9 it was gone.” A “dramatic scenario of liberation” was the order of the day.<sup>6</sup> In reality, the “crumbling of the communist state and the loosening of its grip on the art and culture” were more gradual processes.<sup>7</sup>

The collapse of the Berlin Wall led to a crisis of criticism in the former East. In the Polish context, critic Dorota Jarecka explained at an international congress on “Culture in the Time of Transformation” in 1998 that there was a tension between “the emptiness of pluralism” and “Polish emptiness,” which might be extended in relation to nationalist emptiness in the wake of communism more broadly.<sup>8</sup> Jarecka urged critics to be cautious before jumping on the Western bandwagon, while acknowledging that a retreat into the false comforts of a new national/nationalist discourse was not the right path either. The difficulties of rethinking “Eastern European” art continued to be debated through the 1990s. In her 1998 article “Post-What? Neo-How? For Whom, Where and When?,” Bulgarian curator Iara Boubnova wrote that if “in the beginning of the 1980s the problem for the periphery was how to invade the centre, now, in the

5 — Forgács, “Between Local and Global: Double Bind and Double Challenge.”

6 — Ibid.

7 — Ibid.

8 — Dorota Jarecka, “Some Remarks on the Art Criticism,” in *Culture in the Time of Transformation. International Congress*, eds. János Brendé and Stanisław Jakóbczyk (Poznań: WiS Publishers, 1998), 304.

1990s, when presumably there is no more centre, the question is what, after all, are the specific national characteristics of a quite universal art discourse.”<sup>9</sup>

Gradually, however, a more nuanced and skeptical approach to what Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius once called the “Eastern European” grid, which takes “totalitarianism as its sole certified context,” has been elaborated.<sup>10</sup> Radicalism in Eastern Europe had “an anarchist streak,” David Ost argued in 1991. As communism in the region was unraveling, there was “a general rejection of power, an ethos of openness, and a sense that the object of political struggle was not just to change the government but to change personal life as well. The personal was political, too.”<sup>11</sup> The success of social movements such as the Polish Workers’ Defense Committee from 1976 and Solidarity from 1980 lay in the fact that while they were designed so as not to explicitly challenge the Party’s control of the state, they effectively ended the Party’s monopoly of the public sphere. Without treating art as merely a strategy artists used to survive under a repressive totalitarian state, it became possible to argue that art of the socialist period played a part in the production of new modes of subjectivization.

When, in 1986, Polish art historian Andrzej Turowski published a book on avant-garde art titled *Existe-t’il un art de l’europe de l’est?* (*Is There an Art of Eastern Europe?*), he could not have predicted that artists and art historians would still be debating the question more than thirty years later. But critiques of what travels under the heading “Eastern Europe” have remained as heated as those about Europe itself. Writing in 1993, Žižek articulated his now well-known claim that “Eastern Europe functions for the West as its Ego-Ideal (*Ich-Ideal*): the point from which the West sees itself as a likeable, idealized form, worthy of love. The real object of fascination for the West is therefore the gaze, namely, the supposedly naïve gaze by means of which Eastern Europe stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy.”<sup>12</sup> Not long after, the writer Slavenka Drakulić went so far as to reverse this, proposing that Europe “was built by those of us living on the edges because it is only from there that you would need to imagine something like Europe to save you from your complexes, insecurities, and fears.”<sup>13</sup> For Drakulić, Europe itself is the “ghost.” Art historians, for their part, are still reckoning with the task of producing an adequate European art history that encompasses the former East, still reckoning, too, with Jacques Derrida’s thought of 1991 that “today” we “no longer want either Eurocentrism or anti-Eurocentrism.”<sup>14</sup> Though artworks and artists serve as our allies in this historical task, in view of artists’ propensity to constantly rewrite their own histories and to invent those of others, they do not always make it any easier.

9 — Iara Boubnova, “Post-What? Neo-How? For Whom, Where and When?,” *Moscow Art Magazine* 22 (1998): 24.

10 — Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, “Polish Conceptual Art,” *ArtMargins* 2003: <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/4-books/292-polish-conceptual-art>.

11 — David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 2.

12 — Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 200.

13 — Slavenka Drakulić, *Café Europa: Life after Communism* (London: Hachette Digital, 1996), 197.

14 — Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 12–13.

# Summary of Critical Texts

JULIET KINCHIN

**This chapter introduces diverse types of engagement with history on the part of** artists, curators, and historians, all of whom have lived through socialism and its aftermath in the East and have been part of the increasingly multilayered flow of ideas, artworks, and people between East and West. A common thread that runs throughout is the desire to dismantle the binary attitudes and institutionalized narratives of twentieth-century art defined by the geopolitics of the Cold War. Eda Čufer highlights how the cultural Cold War past is connected to its post-1989 present, and traces how interdependent concepts of East and West have inflected the evolving historiography as well as practices of modern art. In recognition of this, she argues for the development of new transnational methodologies that are flexible enough to articulate complexities “between the dissolving, restructuring centre and the growing number of active, expansive peripheries.” Two such active peripheries in the Baltic states of Lithuania and Estonia are the focus of contributions by artist Deimantas Narkevičius and historian Andres Kurg, respectively. The latter explores the contradictions within overarching narratives of socialist modernization, focusing on the competing strategies of three artists in 1970s Tallinn who were involved in recording particularities of the local environment and highlighting forgotten or liminal urban spaces. It is perhaps significant that the other three texts in this chapter relate in some way to the former Yugoslavia, an amalgam of culturally diverse socialist republics squeezed between two rival Cold War blocs and forced to mediate between contradictory demands and influences. Belgrade-based curator Jelena Vesić, for example, reflects critically on the Yugoslavian model of self-management, arguing that contemporary pressures upon cultural institutions to become economically self-sustaining, as well as widespread interest in generating new culture through cooperative networks or sharing platforms, have spurred renewed critical engagement with the strategies and concepts of Yugoslavian “non-conformist” art of the 1960s to 1980s. Igor Zabel’s paper “Art and State: From Modernism to the Retro-Avant-Garde” focuses on the symbiosis in postwar Yugoslavia between modernism and socialist ideology. He analyzes the scandal that ensued in 1987 when the authorities judging a poster competition for the federal Youth Day failed to recognize the winning design by a group called *Novi Kolektivizam* (NK, New Collectivism) as a barely altered copy of a Nazi poster celebrating the Third Reich. This example of what NK termed “retro-avant-gardism” temporarily unmasked the political manipulation of modernist aesthetics.

The importance of practice-based research in recovering lost histories and destabilizing canonical readings of the past is further reflected in the inclusion of artist-authors in this chapter. For Narkevičius and David Maljković, as well as cultural workers in the Institute for Duration, Location and Variables (DeLVe) and Prelom Kolektiv, critical reflection on living with the physical and psychological legacy of socialism becomes an artistic strategy rather than an exercise in constructing objective, scholarly histories. Narkevičius’s film *His-story* (1998) presents the artist’s individual experience of concrete changes “taking place in the shadow of Big Events,” while his documentary



*Lietuvos Energija* (*Energy Lithuania*, 2000) narrates the social diffusion of ideology through conversations with workers about a Soviet-era power plant that has become “like a museum of industrial thought.” Similarly, Maljković’s fascination with Vojin Bakić’s monument on Petrova Gora has drawn him into a personal discovery not only of socialist modernism in Yugoslavia but of earlier avant-garde art of the 1920s and 1930s and Conceptual practices of the 1970s, all of which were invisible during his studies at the art academy in Zagreb. Vesić writes as a cofounder of Prelom Kolektiv, an independent arts organization operating in Belgrade from 2005 to 2010. Prelom’s study of the Student Culture Centre in 1970s Belgrade and DeLve’s efforts to trace the history of self-organization from the 1960s Gorgona Group through to the Group of Six Artists in the 1970s also contribute to a revised genealogy of contemporary art, with an emphasis on the continuity of self-critical and collective practices. The intention of these exhibition-research projects by Prelom and DeLve has been to undercut any sense of an institutionalized, comprehensive history by bringing together a patchwork of different voices and perspectives that illuminate the nebulous functioning of an art scene. Taken together, the writings in this chapter highlight what Vesić describes as “the numerous contradictions permeating the complex net of relationships between the institution, state, community, and individual at particular historical moments.”

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## Conversation

KATALIN LADIK AND TAMÁS ST.AUBY WITH JON HENDRICKS

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**JON HENDRICKS: What were the conceptual bases of your work before 1989, both individually and together, and since 1989, both in Hungary and in exile?**

**KATALIN LADIK:** All of my work has the same spiritual and intellectual roots, no matter in which historical period or country it has been created. In the multicultural and multinational Yugoslavia from the 1960s to the 1980s, artists enjoyed a fairly significant level of creative freedom. It was largely this multicultural environment that inspired my work. The political leadership of this period was to some extent lenient and tolerant toward the avant-garde forms of art. However, as a woman, I have experienced the oppressive and punitive measures and mechanisms of the Balkans’ male-chauvinist society and its cultural politics. I had to experience my own minority and inferior status at my workplace, in my artistic career, and in my personal life: what a man was allowed to do was considered unacceptable for a woman. Even so, I feel that we—Yugoslavian artists—enjoyed a greater creative freedom as compared to artists in Hungary. I left Yugoslavia in 1992 because of the Yugoslav wars. By that point Yugoslavia had ceased to exist; it had fallen apart to form smaller countries. My birthplace, Novi Sad, is now part of Serbia.

**TAMÁS ST.AUBY:** When I was a teenager in the late ’50s and showed my texts and images to my companions, I experienced envy from them sometimes. Their bad-mouthing could be shocking, but my pity on them was deeper, so since I was responsible for their sufferings, I tried to find a way to diminish the quality of my work while still being



Katalin Ladik. *Shaman Poem*. 1970. Performance, Zagreb, Yugoslavia. Courtesy the artist

effective that wouldn't incite others to break two of the Ten Commandments. This process drove me to the border of the Bad & Good, Prohibited & Free, Determinism & Free Will, Hierarchy & Anarchy, Church/State & Individual, Work & St.Rike, Object & Subject, Representation & Presentation, Art & Non-Art Art, Imitation & Action, Hell & Heaven, and all the dichotomies established by the given Mythical Status Quo. In the mid-'60s, the idea of [Joseph] Beuys, [George] Maciunas, and others about "everybody is an artist" proved to me that I'm not alone at the grassroots level. This conviction was in organic symbiosis with socialist/communist ideology, so I propagated Fluxus as Neo-Socialist-Realism, and established the International Parallel Union of Telecommunications in 1966, a Big Sister institution to counterbalance the power of the International Telecommunication Union, which controls the totality of the electromagnetic spectrum deeply into interstellar space as well. In an act of calumny, the Muscovite military-mercantile bureaucracy charged me with subversive activity connected to the CIA, imprisoned me, and then sent me into exile in 1974. In Switzerland, I continued without restrictions developing the Subsistence Level Standard Project 1984 W. After the restoration of capitalism in the ex-Soviet bloc, I resettled in Hungary on June 16, 1991, the day of the withdrawal operation of the Red Army. I did not change my mind.

**JH: From your perspective and geographic position,  
how did the shift in 1989 affect your art?**

KL: My creative career and personal life were already influenced by political events before 1989. With Slobodan Milošević's rise to power, toxic, destructive processes that blocked not only my own creative work but the activities of many other artists gained strength. As a result, many emigrated. I was especially immobilized by the punitive embargo against Yugoslavia. It was impossible to travel with a Yugoslavian passport. I received many invitations, but I was unable to participate in many international poetry events, art exhibitions, and performance festivals. For this reason, I was absent from the international art world for four or five years. Milošević's dictatorship greatly hastened the processes leading to the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars. Its cultural politics perverted artistic values. Hatred overcame society. I felt cut off; I was suffocating. In 1989, I was watching the "revolution" in Romania on TV. Even then, the "live feed" of the events felt like an absurd performance—as if Eugène Ionesco had written this "reality show." I felt as if the balance and ethics of the world had turned upside down all around me. So I "fled ahead," *ahead of* the war. I didn't flee *from* the war, I fled *ahead of* it, to Hungary, in the hope that Hungary would not be overtaken by the psychosis of hatred. At that time, my son was studying in Budapest, at the music academy. I didn't want a border between myself and my son; I wanted to be near him. I wished not to start over in Hungary but to continue with my creative career, which had been interrupted by the breakup of Yugoslavia. Even now, living in Hungary, my inspiration comes from my experiences in the late, multicultural Yugoslavia.

TS: No how. And I'm not an artist, but if I would be waterboarded in Guantanamo, I would confess to being a non-art artist.

**JH: Has the post-1989 generation of artists referenced your earlier work?**

KL: Yes. Quite a few references have been made, and there have been multiple theses written about my work, including my performances. I am always surprised that people are still interested in me. I wonder if it is possible that my past struggles remain



Tamás St.Auby (Tamás Szentjóby). *UFO (tryst)*. May 1, 1968. Happening, Szentendre, Hungary. Courtesy the artist

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relevant in this age. Is that why people care for my work? Do they still have to face the same issues I faced in the last century? If so, I am saddened by this.

TS: Sometimes in epigone exhibitions and by direct plagiarism.

**JH: Do you feel as isolated from a new establishment over the past twenty-five years as you did in the previous twenty-five?**

KL: I have never felt isolated—not back then and not now. “Artistic solitude” is a prerequisite of art. When my work was finished—whether it be poetry, visual art, sound poetry, or performance—the audience, and society at large, reacted to it twenty-five years ago, and still does. I can sense that my art has an effect on people. This is the greatest evidence of not being isolated, not being alone.

TS: Partly yes, I feel isolated, because they haven’t arrested me yet, as if neither IPUT nor I exist, and partly no, I don’t feel isolated, because their legally paid museum directors, art historians, curators, journalists, and apparatchiks are committing calumnies against IPUT and its trust. ee in bankruptcy, me, as if IPUT and I do exist. And the state-run Hungarian Executive Penalty University of Fine Arts kicked me out of my job by envy and calumny, because I objected to the torturing and abusing of students and faculty and demanded Basic Democracy for all students and faculty.

**JH: How do you see your past work from today’s perspective? Have your opinions of it changed? If so, how, and in what ways?**

KL: My opinions haven’t changed; I still see my past work in the same way as always. My profile as an artist was shaped by both Yugoslavian—Central European—events in the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s, and my personal life. In my opinion, my work is the authentic result of the periods both before and after the regime change.

TS: I should have disseminated more bad images, more bad texts, videos, music, etc., to liberate those who are declared to be untalented by the Church and the State. And probably I should have organized more St.Rikes for Basic Democracy and Basic Income. But it is difficult in an environment where, contrary to Stanley Milgram, not only 83 percent of the people, but 83 percent of the 17 percent as well, are envious and calumnious, that is, break the ninth and tenth Commandments—authoritarian.

I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL AND EVERYTHING!

LONG LIVE BASIC INCOME!

LONG LIVE BASIC DEMOCRACY!

LONG LIVE ST.RIKE!

LONG LIVE CHELSEA MANNING!

—Tamas St.Turba

(Trust. ee in bankruptcy of IPUT /International Parallel Union of Telecommunications/; Agent of NETRAF/ Neo-Socialist. Realist. IPUT’s Global Counter Arthist.ory-Falsifiers Front/)

# Enjoy Me, Abuse Me, I Am Your Artist: Cultural Politics, Their Monuments, Their Ruins

EDA ČUFER

## Disposition

If communism stood behind the narrative of the twentieth century, behind the narrative of the twenty-first century stands its ruin. How, then, should we attempt a new reading of the history of the twentieth century? How will a new politics be articulated—not only on the axis of East and West but also of North and South? How, in the rotation of perspectives, will the perspective of the post-communist East be included?

Throughout modernity, the West and East have been linked.<sup>1</sup> Linked not only through the imaginary of revolution and the historical avant-gardes, but also through a largely unacknowledged and intricate set of codependencies and compensations. What happened to one affected the other, not always in the sense of a diagrammable dialectic, but often in terms of a sublimated desire or accelerated dysfunction. For the East, the experience of communism was an experience grounded in reality. It was not an intellectual exercise or ideological flirtation, but a real engagement with a system that promised to solve the major conflicts and controversies of modern society. On the other hand, there is no denying that the East's experiment appeared glamorous to the West. Its external appearance functioned as a mirror in which the West perfected its own image and admired itself as a "work in progress," where for the best part of a century the solutions and responses relating to the enigma of modernity could be constructed, modelled, rehearsed and judged. The East, meanwhile, saw its image reflected nowhere outside of the borders of its own social experiment. As Andrei Codrescu has observed, the year 1989 did not bring about the immediate inner transformation of either the historical or the psychological profile of the

East formed during the communist era.<sup>2</sup> What did change was the West's access to this imaginary communist East. The removal of the "wall of shame," as Bruno Latour has referred to the Berlin Wall, made it possible for this territory to be inundated by a river of goods.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 1989, the integrated universal world economy which had developed during the Cold War period underwent an expansion of explosive proportions and began operating transnationally across state borders previously resistant to Western market influences.<sup>4</sup> It took less than fifteen years for the operating conditions and principles of this new stage of globalisation, this new world order, to be established. During this time, the Western model of liberal capitalism assumed a new reproductive logic, warping the concepts and values of the former territorial West into a spider's web of economic transterritoriality. The West of Cold War times became as much a historical phantom as the former communist East.

The idea of a de-territorialised West which, like an empire, is re-territorialising itself within the global framework, is a frequent motif of contemporary critical discourse. Globalisation, nationalism and ethnocentrism are not mutually exclusive concepts. Each of them is capable of suppressing class conflict, the prevailing motif of the previous century, in the name of some fictive pre-(post-)modern unity (global, national or ethnic).<sup>5</sup> The collapse of former multinational states into national and ethnic communities, and the regression of already-secularised communities into networks of religious fundamentalism, are among the means by which the new "empire" can reorganise its

2 — A. Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside*, Addison-Wesley, Boston 1990.

3 — B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1993.

4 — In *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, Abacus, London 1995, Eric Hobsbawm locates the formation of the integrated world economy between the years 1943 and 1973.

5 — D. Bjelić, "Global Aesthetic and the Serbian Cinema," in I. Imre (ed.), *East European Cinema*, Routledge, New York 2005.

1 — In this essay, I use the terms "West" and "East" as they were defined by the geopolitics of the Cold War, namely, as Western Europe and the United States of America, on the one hand, and Eastern Europe and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, on the other hand.

resources. Many have been forced to take a step backwards in order to achieve a promised leap forwards, as globalisation, the ultimate “dispositive of power,” shapes the new century.<sup>6</sup> Even as attempts to control globalisation seem to come from all possible directions, globalisation operates as a blind force, unpredictable and beyond regulatory order. Regardless of geography or stance, the question that must be addressed is how to use this force—how to “reorient” it towards some constructive goal, how to turn its abstract universalism, even its transcendentalism, towards particular problems—thereby grounding it in concrete positions, concrete struggles. “Reorientation,” Susan Buck-Morss suggests, is the name for “revolution” in the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

As part of the integrated universal world economy, the neoliberal art system also evolved during the Cold War period into one of the key functional systems of the dispositive of power in the Western democracies. This art system, while imperfect, nevertheless became the only one that could provide material and logistical support for the formation of a global culture—the critical culture that accompanies economic and political “development.” This is not a culture that reveals the virtues or praises the unity of the global order; rather, it points to the differences, inequalities and internal conflicts that arise as a result of economic and technological development and the politics of the powerful. A discourse that would enable a truly constructive response to the controversies surrounding neoliberal global capitalism and its art system is still in the process of formation. The existing critical methodologies are no longer sufficient to address, or capable of articulating, the complexities of emerging relations within the new cultural realms and political stratifications—between the dissolving, restructuring centre and the growing number of active, expansive peripheries. As non-Western cultural spaces and subjectivities are assimilated under the wing of systems (economic, technological, cultural) that clearly speak in the idiom of

Western hegemony, the need for a tactics of “reorientation” (articulating new languages and positions that challenge the syntax of the dominant idiom) becomes acute. Tactics, in other words, that probe the new conditions from thoughtful angles and pose questions derived from constructive intellectual formulations rather than defensive postures. It is important to acknowledge that, after all, non-Westerners are not the only ones who have been experiencing post-1989 shocks and transition traumas. The neoliberal art system, formed within the parameters of the intellectual and political climate of the Cold War, was once a transparent concept, judging itself according to the complacent and self-satisfied premise that art was somehow equated with individual freedom, that it was an “autonomous zone” where the wounds and pleasures of alienation could be mediated into enlightened forms of modern subjectivity. As long as art was the highly desired product and exclusive property of Western culture, it could be viewed as a necessity, even if the primary function it performed was ensuring the survival of one’s own system of belief. But when different notions of art started getting through the Western filters, forcing a critical reexamination of the legitimacy of long-held convictions and institutionalised narratives—when the stories coming in from the tributaries started shifting the whole direction and flow of art thinking—this proved frustrating for individuals shaped by laboratory cultural experiences. Many influential intellectual and artistic circles in the West still defend the principles of modernism and the Western avant-gardes established during the Cold War without ever having systematically analysed the actual historical conditions under which the dominant art paradigm was produced and practiced in the last century. When nostalgic, academic leftism is applied to the realms of new political and cultural stratifications, the results are no less regressive and pathetic than defensive nationalism or ethnocentrism.

In order to set out a concrete position—one that will itself be in need of reorientation—let us attempt to examine the reasons behind the absence of a synthesised historical narrative about the development of the content, forms and contexts of the cultural and artistic production that took place under communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union between 1930 and 1989, that is, from the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The persisting cultural amnesia of the East with regard to the period of communism points

6 — Michel Foucault defines the term “dispositive of power” as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourse, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions.” M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, Pantheon, New York 1980.

7 — S. Buck-Morss, “Visual Studies and Global Imagination,” *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 2, Summer 2004, p. 2 (online journal with downloadable PDF files, [www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/publications/papers/journal2](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/publications/papers/journal2), retrieved 12 June 2005).

both to the powerlessness of post-communist countries to democratize themselves through their own historical, intellectual and creative resources, as well as to the exclusive and ideological character of the historical narrative and discourses of the Western conception of modernism and the avant-garde movements—discourses that evolved for the most part in the second half of the twentieth century, parallel with the formation of the neoliberal art system.

[...]

### Situation: East

[...]

For all the reasons that Cold War cultural policy of the East cannot be as clearly reconstructed as that of the West, we will nonetheless attempt to extract some meaning from the East's cultural amnesia and discursive neurosis with respect to its own history from the rise of Stalinism to the fall of communism (1930–89).

In the ecstatic, transitional years immediately following the 1917 revolution in Russia, as in the heady, hopeful years of New Deal America, a struggle for cultural identity unfolded as various cultural groups and artistic movements vied with each other to provide the best interpretation and embodiment of what was supposed to be the *sublime* ideal of modern revolutionary culture. As Buck-Morss has written, there was massive support for the events of October 1917, but this support was not of one mind.<sup>8</sup> Utopian dreamers of all types were eager to interpret the revolutionary future as the one they envisaged. Alongside the various avant-garde circles there was also, for example, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, an umbrella organisation of easel painters founded in 1922 as a reaction to the avant-garde attack on representational art. Proletarian cultural organisations, which in 1917 were centralised in Proletkult, were financed at the local and factory levels in conjunction with workers' organisations. Funding decisions in Proletkult were made independently of the state and the party. Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, who was responsible for cultural affairs at the party level, focused his cultural policy on the importance of political engagement rather than on any one dominant artistic style. He supported all kinds of artists' groups and encouraged them to compete with each other in demonstrating revolutionary authenticity. While the Russian avant-garde had existed as an

art movement before the revolution, it was only after 1917 that it received official recognition and financial support. The coexistence, even codependence, of the Russian avant-garde with more traditional modern and academic groups reveals the complexity of Soviet cultural history before the advent of Stalinism, which Boris Groys has analysed in his book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*.<sup>9</sup> By connecting the birth of Stalinist culture to the spirit of the avant-garde, Groys exposes a deep controversy between art and society in the age of modernity.

[...]

This is the paradox that also occupies Peter Bürger.<sup>10</sup> In his formulation, the avant-garde movements differed from modernism by calling for a total change in the social conditions in which art is produced, not just a revolution in the understanding of the formal principles of the artwork. It was the avant-garde movements that took the greatest risk in erasing the distinctions between the political and cultural definition of revolution. If we examine avant-garde theories, praxis and manifestos carefully, says Groys, we cannot deny the fact that a connection was made between, on the one hand, the artistic will for controlling and organising material in accordance with the artist's own principles and, on the other, the political will for power. The fact that Western art history has acknowledged avant-garde artists to the point that museums gladly accept their work is, Groys asserts, not a victory for the artist but rather a form of reparation from the victorious democratic state. In this sense, Groys provocatively concludes, the art of socialist realism (and Nazi art, as well) achieved a position that the avant-garde had sought from the very beginning, that is, a position that placed it beyond the museum, beyond art history, making it absolutely other in relation to any and all cultural norms. The discrepancy between the avant-garde's and the Party's interpretations of the revolution became apparent quite early, around 1919. Buck-Morss locates this discrepancy in a "politics of conflicting temporalities." If an artist chose to accept the cosmological concept of time as constructed by the Party through its propagandist imaginary, this meant glorifying the Party and concealing all of its failures, which began to accumulate once it started trying to carry out its concrete social

9 — B. Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich 1988.

10 — P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984.



projects and plans. The visions of avant-garde artists soon began to diverge drastically from the difficult and dirty reality, and, in the post-revolutionary climate, began to resemble bourgeois European modernism. In its struggle to win a place in the historical continuum of art, Buck-Morss argues, the avant-garde lost its credibility as a concrete revolutionary strategy. Groys concludes that Stalin's cultural policies, which should be studied as an integral part of twentieth-century cultural history, fulfilled an inherent demand of the avant-garde movements, namely, to move from the presentation of reality to its transformation. In this way, Stalinist policy crossed a line that avant-garde artists themselves did not dare cross. By the mid-1920s, suprematism and futurism were already being regarded as passé. Any art that did not develop in the direction outlined by the Party was considered to be historically regressive, bourgeois and counterrevolutionary. The key moment in the temporal unscrolling and establishment of the Party's cosmological time, which was beginning to supplant all other temporalities, was the death of Lenin in 1924. Time stopped with Lenin's death. The committee responsible for arranging Lenin's funeral authorised the mummification and preservation of his body for all time. Artists were invited to collaborate on the design of the corpse's house—the sarcophagus and mausoleum. Tatlin believed that the mausoleum should be a triumph of engineering, while Malevich suggested, on the very day of Lenin's death, that his grave should take the form of a cube: "The cube is no longer a geometric body. It is a new object with which we try to portray eternity, to create a new set of circumstances, with which we can maintain Lenin's eternal life, defeating death."<sup>11</sup>

Although neither Tatlin nor Malevich ended up designing the public mortality structure in which Lenin's body now rests, on view for all to see, this building continues to symbolise even today the demonic, impossible bond between revolution and the avant-garde. When, in 1992, the IRWIN group, as part of the project *NSK Embassy Moscow*, realised the performance *Black Square on Red Square*, in which a square black cloth, forty metres by forty metres, was unfolded on Red Square in Moscow, the action provoked a certain discomfort among Russian artists. At first, it seemed that this discomfort was due to territorial resentment (foreign

artists were appropriating Russia's historical material as their own), but later it turned out that the reasons were linked to a deeper collective trauma.<sup>12</sup> In 1995, the Bulgarian theoretician Vladislav Todorov confronted the issue of the cultural meaning of Lenin's mausoleum and, in his analysis of the specifically Eastern scientific and theoretical utopian imaginary, illuminated a different, thrillingly transcendentalist face of modernity.<sup>13</sup> The sacralisation of Lenin heralded a regression from the modern into a pre-(post-)modern pseudo-religious society in which the Party defined (as the church had done previously) the relationship between signifier and signified, or rather, it closed the semiotic gulf and prevented the eruption of the pluralism of interpretations that characterise the modern, alienated, industrial and post-industrial society of the West.

The final shift to the cultural policy of Stalinism was formally announced in 1932 by a decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party abolishing all artistic associations. From that point onwards, all Soviet artistic workers would be grouped according to their fields of operation into unified organisations such as the Union of Writers, the Union of Visual Artists, etc. The concurrent termination of the New Economic Policy meant that at the same time the market for artworks was also abolished. As a result, the newly centralised artistic groups were now all forced to work for a single patron: the state. As part of these measures, an officially prescribed artistic style was also formulated, namely socialist realism, which [...] was not devised to suit the taste of the masses. The masses hated it. Socialist realism was itself a carefully designed construct of the Soviet party elite. This centralist, markerless model of cultural policy, which completely blocked the kind of cultural dynamics and temporal pluralism found in modern Western society, was, after World War II, also applied to other Eastern bloc countries. Despite the fact that the Soviet model was grafted in very different ways onto the very different cultural traditions of Eastern Europe, it was nonetheless true that even in the friendliest version of Eastern European communism—in Tito's Yugoslavia, which in 1948 renounced

12 — For a more detailed discussion of this project and documentation of the reaction to it, see E. Čufer (ed.), *NSK Embassy Moscow: How the East Sees the East*, Loža Gallery, Koper and Obalne Galejije, Piran 1992.

13 — V. Todorov, *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination*, State University of New York Press, New York 1994.

11 — N. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1983, p. 190.

its allegiance to Stalin—socialism existed as a system in which the Party placed itself above all state interventions and in which the official cultural professional organisations had monopolies in their fields and acted repressively towards any cultural practice that did not wish to submit to their hierarchies. Over time, the monopoly of the unions was not based so much on the idea of maintaining social realism as the one legitimate style as on the principle of maintaining control over the definition of art. In countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia, Unions of Visual Artists tolerated or even propagated rigid versions of Greenbergian modernism while remaining intolerant of any approach to art other than the one they prescribed. Today, many official institutions in the East are still very proud of their collections of Eastern modern paintings, as if wanting to say: “Look, we too were modern. Art during the communist period was not only social realism, but also about modernism, here as well as in the West.” Indeed this art was sometimes more fanatically Western than Western art itself. The artist who submitted to the policy of the unions had work and was exhibited, while those who did not were abandoned and dropped into the void of historical amnesia. Just as we cannot fully equate the postwar cultural policies of Western European countries with those of America, so we cannot fully equate the cultural policies of Eastern European countries with the policy of the Soviet Union. Both Cold War superpowers were exporting to Europe (which was still trying to reconstitute itself after two World Wars) their own particular model of cultural production forged in the 1930s and 1940s. These two protagonists were the ones who created the political geometry that we still live with today—the idea of West-East as a line and a divide, as opposed to a continuum and a unity.

### Tale of the (Two) Square(s)

In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, it was a mortal flaw for an artist to be a “formalist.” Kazimir Malevich—the inventor of the “square”—returned to geometrical figurative painting after 1928, a move that even today challenges interpreters of his work. On the other hand, formalism was [. . .] the most valued criterion for political art in America in the late 1930s and 1940s. The stance of apolitical politicality became a weapon in the Cold War when non-representational art was equated with the democratic societies of the West, as opposed to the representational realism of totalitarian regimes (in this regard no difference was made

between Nazism/fascism and communism). For this reason, according to Buck-Morss, it is truly revealing to observe the fate of the square as it moved through the complex political landscape of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the square and abstract art were not the exclusive property of the Russian avant-garde. The Bauhaus, which was also prosecuted for practicing modern art (its closure was forced by the Nazis in 1933), also worked in this idiom, as did the Dutch de Stijl artists. But it was only in the internationalised environments of the West that the square managed to survive.

While the official fate of the square in the East in the 1930s was monumentalised in Red Square in Moscow, crucial debates around this image and its metamorphoses continued in the West right up to the time of conceptualism.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, in his essay “Conceptual Art 1962–1969,”<sup>16</sup> while analysing the genealogy of the square and the cube in 1960s American art, refers to the response of minimalist and conceptualist artists to the publication of the first comprehensive history of the Russian avant-garde, Camilla Gray’s *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863–1922*, in 1962.<sup>17</sup> “This question is of particular importance,” Buchloh writes, “since many of the formal strategies of early conceptual art appear at first glance to be as close to the practices and procedures of the constructivist/productivist avant-garde as minimal sculpture had appeared to be dependent upon its materials and morphologies.” And while there have been some attempts since 1989 to establish a parallel between Western conceptualism and the concurrent conceptual practices in the East, such comparisons, in fact, do more to underscore the differences than to prove equivalence between the two phenomena. These differences will only become clearer as the distinct sociopolitical contexts in which these works were created and the different positions and manoeuvrability of the artists within the framework of their respective societies is better understood.

Western artists of the 1960s and 1970s, through the deconstruction of the formalist frameworks of modernism, were primarily

14 — S. Buck-Morss, op. cit.

15 — The “secret history” and the fate of the square in Eastern European art must still be explored and analysed.

16 — B. H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* no. 55, 1990, p. 140.

17 — C. Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863–1922*, Thames & Hudson, London 1962. A new edition of this book, revised and enlarged by M. Burleigh-Motley, appeared in 1986 as *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863–1922*, Thames & Hudson, London.



IRWIN. *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 1992. Installation at a private apartment in Moscow. Courtesy the artists

concerned with the restrictive and repressive features of the art system and the dominant role of the market, in the context of which—as Marcel Duchamp demonstrated at the beginning of the twentieth century—the question “What is art?” becomes the object of legal definition and the consequence of institutional valuation. That which the artist produces is, as Duchamp posited, only a kind of raw material, “which must be ‘refined,’ as pure sugar from molasses,” in the assessment of the public: “The artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius: he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of art history.”<sup>18</sup>

If we accept Duchamp’s persuasive arguments, then how do we define—both within the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and in the framework of neoliberal capitalism—the cultural or market value of the Eastern European art practices that emerged in the period 1930–89? The cultural meaning of these practices could hardly be refined “as pure sugar from molasses” by the verdict of the environment in which they developed; or rather, considering the conditions under which the verdict was developed, the work has been preserved in a state of rawness, which must again in today’s new context be socially refined and appraised.

In the late 1950s, artistic and political undergrounds began to take shape in Eastern Europe, independently and disconnectedly from one another, but in response to similar conditions of repressive cultural politics of the communist state. These were the years in which the discourses of postwar Eastern art started to gradually develop outside of any state cultural policy and without the benefit of any “umbilical cord of gold” connected to state or private sponsorship.<sup>19</sup> It was during this same time that the West began to rediscover the Russian historical avant-garde. The euphoria over Russian historical avant-garde material was the result of several factors, of which the 1962 publication of Camilla Gray’s history was a key one, but not the only one. Also important were a number of studies published in English, French and Italian by other scholars, both from the Soviet Union and abroad, who during the Khrushchev era gained access to archives and previously banned sources on the basis of which they were

able to make reliable historical reconstructions. But as these books and catalogues were printed in the West for the Western marketplace, artists from the Soviet Union remained in the dark about this part of their own cultural heritage. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s, as this narrative was filtered back into Soviet cultural space through the West, that Soviet artists and intellectuals could piece together this narrative for themselves.

The historical codification of the Russian avant-garde is, in a strange way, connected with the incandescent spirit of Western New Left intellectual and artistic trends as well as the student reform movements of the late 1960s. Art historian Éva Forgács, in her essay “How the New Left Invented East-European Art,” argues that the concept of Eastern European art did not even exist until the 1960s, when it was first established through the gaze of the West. Artists from the countries of the communist East never actually identified themselves with the East, either in the period between the two World Wars or in the Cold War period.<sup>20</sup> While it is possible, as Forgács states, that political repression created a certain feeling of solidarity among artists who developed strategies of resistance against these regimes, the fact is that no lasting connections or exchanges could be established that would have permitted some sort of common discourse to evolve. In principle, communism did not have an international cultural policy within the framework of its political bloc, and if cultural exchanges did take place at the state level, we can be sure that those who were at odds with the logic of the regime took no part in them whatsoever. The West’s rediscovery of and fascination with the Russian avant-garde also created an interest in the art history of other Eastern bloc countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, during the time that the contemporary art market was being constructed, cultural exchanges and international institutional infrastructure were being developed, and American cultural policies of the Cold War were being exported, numerous exhibitions and exchanges were organised with the East. The idealisation of the Russian avant-garde was embraced by the New Left, which was attempting to rethink the reasons behind the failure of the earlier leftist project in the West and to strategise possible ways of revitalising it. Combusting in the heat of this desire was

18 — M. Duchamp, *The Creative Act*, Sub Rosa, Brussels 2000.

19 — These practices were described under various status labels in the countries of Eastern Europe: “unofficial,” “alternative,” “subcultural,” “underground,” etc.

20 — Éva Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East-European Art,” *Centropa* 3 no. 2, May 2003.

the Situationist International, viewed by many commentators as the last ultra-left art movement, which not only refused to surrender to the hegemony of the marketplace but insisted on analysing, to its last breath, the logic behind this hegemony. Nostalgia for revolution and social utopia was being expressed in American poststructuralist circles as well. When the first issue of *October*, a new American journal of art, theory, criticism and politics, appeared in 1976, the editors explained that they had given the journal its name “in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practices, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique.” “For the artists of that time and place,” they wrote, “literature, painting, architecture, film required and generated their own Octobers, radical departures articulating the historical movement which enclosed them, sustaining it through civil war, factional dissension and economic crisis.”<sup>21</sup> In the reformist climate of the West in the 1960s and 1970s, the Russian avant-garde represented, then, an unattainable taste or enjoyment which the Western avant-gardes—despite their link to the “umbilical cord of gold”—had never actually experienced.

Since the West was discovering the Russian avant-garde at a time when the underground movements in the East were already clearly formed, it is worth asking why the critical consciousness of the neo-left in the West did not seek its pleasure in discovering and analysing these Eastern European movements—its contemporaries—particularly since groups and movements as OHO, Gorgona, Sots-Art, Moscow Conceptualism, Romanian body art and others were neither invisible nor inaccessible; there were enough links between Western intellectual networks and Eastern artistic circles to make contact through any number of channels. But one of the rules of the Western art system’s historical narrative in the twentieth century is that it includes only those outsiders who came inside—or who left the outside—who crossed the Cold War’s borders and began to operate within the framework of the Western marketplace. For example, Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s was defined by an immensely rich cultural and artistic scene; it prided itself

on a policy of open borders, and it considered itself to be the most Westernised communist state. But until recently, only two names from this generation—Marina Abramović and Braco Dimitrijević—have had any resonance in the referential frame of the West. Not surprisingly, both live and work in the production framework of Western art. In Forgács’s view, the historical restoration of the Russian avant-garde brought about the recognition of a *different* narrative, one that was parallel to Western modernism. Within this narrative frame, then, the historical avant-garde of other Eastern European countries could also be, and to some degree has been, rehabilitated—Czech cubism, Czech surrealism, Polish constructivism, Hungarian constructivism, Hungarian expressionism, for example. But what about the entire postwar artistic production of Eastern Europe, including the post-Stalinist art of the Soviet Union? It remains hidden between the cracks of the two great narratives of modernism. What about the fate of the “other square,” the one of the East European post-avant-garde underground movements, to mention but one of many other exciting stories?

With some wit for decoding and some peculiar imagination with which one can read the future from the past, these stories’ moralities as well as their formalities speak straight to the problems of the new century. The century where the plurality of interpretations about our global reality becomes centralised through technology as part of an endless mechanical flow, a web of insufferable egalitarianism, which, in a manner completely different from anti-pluralist Stalinist cultural policy, overrides the “politics of conflicting temporalities,” and in doing so, produces a similarly transcendental effect of endless and eternal spectacle. A chimera of a self-generating reality machine which every day asks us to supply our services for some small compensation but rarely for our opinions and judgments. A kind of world which would seem fine even without us. This situation should finally encourage us to explore and understand how the realities we live in are constructed, and to detect and name their hidden engineers.

21 — *October* no. 1, Spring 1976, p. 3.

Excerpted from *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*. Edited by IRWIN. London: Afterall, 2006.

# E-mail conversation, autumn 2000

JONAS VALATKEVIČIUS AND DEIMANTAS NARKEVIČIUS

**JONAS VALATKEVIČIUS:** You will probably not be too surprised if I start our conversation with the notion of *history*. Many of your works touch on this theme. Perhaps you could elaborate the position of the artist exploring history? How suitable is it to talk about exploration or research here?

**DEIMANTAS NARKEVIČIUS:** I am not exploring history from some neutral outside position—I live in it. I am no chronicler, just one of history’s “insiders,” trying to find my own place in history. The search for territory is my preferred way of understanding the variety of physical and psychological phenomena in our surroundings. We are mesmerised by all these goings-on, even if they are misleading and illusory most of the time. My efforts to find a territory or motivation for my work—this could, in fact, be called research. But it is a kind of research that constantly influences and changes my own position.

**JV:** You seem to have a somewhat narrow understanding of historical research as, say, the activities of specialised scholars working according to agreed methods. You even seem to claim that true researchers should be examining objects from the outside, “objectively” (I use this term in the technical sense favoured by the scholarly disciplines). Sadly, the time is gone when historians would try to identify with the period they were researching.

The approach to history you are trying to formulate does, I think, amount to observing your own environment with a maximum degree of attentiveness. This may explain your attempts at “finding a place.” Now, there are many ways to realise such intentions. Of course, you are well aware that you are almost the only Lithuanian artist who has adopted the commentary of recent history as a working method.

Do you find that your interest in this particular segment of reality—recent history—is more important for carving out your niche than other contemporary phenomena? You only seem to select those areas on the historical map that are significant today (the Holocaust issue, for instance), and to avoid direct contact with the stereotypical methods usually employed to discuss them. When there is no historical

perspective, historical dimensions risk becoming illusory, unreal.

If there is no historical dimension—or the basic facts are not known—stereotypes will inevitably appear. We would be wrong to assume that the conditions for stereotypical social thinking disappeared after the fall of totalitarianism. The widespread taste for supporting worldviews with sloppily constructed mass opinions is convenient for all kinds of political power structures; it does not matter if they are totalitarian or based on so-called democratic principles. A society that thinks in stereotypes is easier to control, easier to manipulate. The best way to learn about how such control is exerted is to read textbooks in psychological warfare for intelligence officers. (I have one of those books, published in Byelorussia.)

I still remember what you once said: “We have to present our history to the world ourselves, if we do not want someone else to do it.” (I quote from memory here.) Was this a reason for you to take up history?

**DN:** I emphasise—again—that the *historicity* of my works should not be associated with history as a scholarly discipline. Contemporary visual art has enlarged its own field enormously, and is now intertwined with many practices outside art. However, there are still strong historical connections inside art. A new artwork can always be seen as a comment on earlier artistic practices, methods and interests. This is what makes it legible in the visual art context, and that is where I am trying to make room for my activities.

All the stories told by the people in my films are personalised and autobiographical. Transferring them to a visual art space requires artistic strategies.

Although my works deal with contemporary themes, the underlying problems usually go back a long time. I started my work as an artist in a period of dynamic change for my society. The stress and neurosis caused by all the dynamism diverted this society from both historical reflection and future concerns. The ideological “orientation” that dominated for decades was—among other things—an attempt at creating a society above and beyond history.

The new political situation reinserted us into the rotating circuit of history, which inevitably requires a vision. But as we started working on such a vision for ourselves, things reemerged from the past, phenomena that had been hidden under the surfaces of ideology. They led us into uncharted, unwanted, unpleasant territory, muddling our vision of the future.

There is something else that the post-West often finds exotic about the post-Soviet countries, namely the systemic quest for *truth* as a beacon or an organising focus, helping to overcome the political and social upheavals afflicted on society. This situation produces characters who justify their actions by *truth*, or—to put it differently—by subjective laws created to cover up individual behaviour. The ties we see developing between the individual and society here would not be imaginable in a social order based on the rule of law. In Western societies, the judicial system has a controlling function. It becomes part of the mechanisms of repression, whose primary function is to safeguard the legality of the existing regime. In the post-West, our characters would be seen as ordinary criminals.

Post-Soviet society has developed its own codes of conduct and correctness in dealings between people, frequently contradicting the official legal system. Usually, the official framework is weaker than these alternative ethical standards, which are based on the unwritten principles of *truth*. When contemporary legal models begin to function, this provokes a feeling of unease in traditional intellectual circles, where many people still believe in a concocted *people's truth*. *Truth* gives you the strength to carry on with life. For all those post-something societies that lack a functioning rule of law, this *truth*—treated as an almost objective category—is necessary for the justification of painful, *anti-legal* everyday life.

A few words about the issue of the Holocaust in Lithuania. This chapter in our history is crying out for legal investigation. This would influence our vision of the past and our vision of the future. Unfortunately, the theme itself was too much of a shock to our reemerging society, and people opted for the worst form of self-defence, the collective negation that eliminates any discussion. This is not the only insufficiently investigated issue of recent history. But international reactions have made it impossible to completely ignore it. Sadly, the current situation here is that any opinion or comment voiced abroad—often provoked by the passivity of the locals—immediately becomes politicised. Historical events that have

taken place in a defined geographic territory can only be legally laid to rest if the inhabitants themselves finally take them into account and collectively formulate a clear-cut stance on them. Individual action, like showing artworks dealing with the Holocaust, is an attempt at reviving public discussion in the local context. I believe it is possible—in this context—to formulate some answers to the questions posed by history.

**JV:** You are outlining a strategy for artists to contribute, in ways that are acceptable to them, to the shaping of a much-needed future vision for society. Such a vision depends, first of all, on a clarified understanding of the past. You shun the responsibilities of the historian, preferring to enjoy the safety of being an artist, but you seem very politically committed to the issues we are discussing. You say your films can only be interpreted in an art context. At the same time, you agree that the themes you have chosen are extraordinarily significant for today's society and its development.

So far, the reasons you list for working with political themes are societal rather than personal. The impression is that you, as an artist, are primarily motivated by social responsibilities; the activities underlying a work of art are one way of expressing your opinions in public.

The category of historicism, formulated by Karl Popper, could be applied to what you say about the quest for *truth*. This *truth* is used to motivate visions of the future. It is used as an argument by decision-makers in the State. However, investigations into truth are being carried out in the post-West as well. There, however, this truth is not as imperative as in the post-East, and there are even situations where several truths may coexist. I agree with your observation that the *truth* question is asked in moments of tension, when there is a need to unify society around some Big Issue. Unfortunately, I suspect that post-Western societies are being *unified* in similar ways, for instance when bombs are about to fall on countries like Iraq or Serbia.

**DN:** It was not the social changes that prompted me to make social art but the effects these changes have on the individual. The first individual I singled out was myself, or—to be more precise—my own family. I was always sceptical of Lithuanian social art because of its non-individual character. The strategy behind many of the “social” actions was to intervene into space without revealing the individual motivations behind the intervention. In this way, an art



strategy which is actually well suited for provocation somehow lost its edge.

The film *His-story* [1998] was inspired by my own experience. It tells the story of transformations taking place in the shadow of Big Events. This commentary on history is delivered through a portrayal of the concrete changes that affected my immediate surroundings. It is a story about myself, not about history. The first idea was very simple—to tell a story, which in itself is history. We are prompted to perceive the big historical events from an individual perspective, visualised in a free but documentary format. The spectator gets a clear picture of the protagonist's position, against the backdrop of history. I would say that this is political art. This clear-cut individual opinion in a concrete social environment was, in fact, what my older colleagues were afraid of. This came as no surprise to me. It was a reminder of what kind of cultural context we are working in. One thing is absolutely clear: there is no demand for political art on the Lithuanian scene.

[...]

JV: This clash between generations is still topical in many Eastern European countries, though this is often difficult to grasp for Western observers. Would you say that direct confrontation is a good description of the avant-garde strategies of younger-generation artists today? Mini-confrontations seem to happen all the time, in the art world itself or when contemporary culture encounters other social realities.

I also find it interesting that you want to go beyond the ideological interpretation of the transformations in Lithuanian society during the last fifty years. This, I think, is very desirable and should have been attempted long ago. It is difficult to imagine, however, how a non-ideological outlook could have been achieved right after the Soviet upheavals. In the stereotypical languages of our politicians, you could say: "We need time to carry out this task, we need a whole new generation of people without direct personal experience of all the moral dilemmas facing a Soviet citizen."

I believe this de-ideologisation has to happen on two levels. On the one hand, you have to separate practice (economic, social, cultural data) from theory (ideological motivations and explanations). This is, in itself, a theoretical action, necessary if you want to create a suitable framework for down-to-earth discussions about society. On the other hand, we also need to avoid contemporary ideology—which in practice is just as malignant as the old

totalitarian credo—being superimposed on the facts about the past.

For half a century, two ideological systems were confronting each other. One of them proved victorious; the other was thrown on the scrap heap of history. The victorious ideology was kept intact, since it was assumed to be correct, just because it proved victorious. But it is also dangerous, because it comes out of the binary worldview of Cold War superpower competition. Both ideologies were based on the principles of negative identification. "What is typical of them is not typical of us. What is not typical of them is typical of us." This worldview is a serious handicap in today's global reality, which is much more diverse. The natural driving force behind this ideology—the perpetual enemy—is lost. For the upkeep of the system, the production of virtual enemies has become a necessity. These are inserted into the same positions in propaganda and the mass media that used to be occupied by the now-defunct Soviet Union. Now, there is Russia, Iraq, North Korea and China instead, and of course the threatening flow of illegal economic immigrants from postcommunist Europe.

You talk about avant-garde social ideas in general, not just in art. Many of these ideas were also reflected in the culture of the time, and produced quite interesting results. We should also not forget the attempts by artists and intellectuals to break out of their narrow field and to apply ideas already tried out in the arts to the transformation of society at large. But there was never a direct, steady flow of ideas from the consumption of culture to a general social discourse. More often than not, the ideas about societal change formulated by artists and philosophers were simply too radical for their contemporaries. When the real masters of society did make use of such ideas, they usually appropriated them for their own purposes and adapted them to the demands of realpolitik, leaving the true authors behind in their closed cultural circles.

This should not come as a surprise. The unacceptable radicalism of the ideas proposed by the artists and intellectuals often originated in the fundamentally antisocietal strategies of modernist art. Its creators considered themselves elevated high above the faceless crowds. They credited themselves with a much better understanding of the true state of society than that of its statistically average members. They behaved as if the distance between them and these ordinary citizens were enormous. That

is why these authors were used—and then rejected—by the “average” politicians.

During the last century, Lithuania did not, unlike many other European cultures, create any avant-garde platform worthy of interest. I believe this is what you are talking about—that avant-garde programmes should be formulated in culture first. This never happened in Lithuania, but instead there were attempts at cultivating rudimentary forms of the avant-garde in other sectors of society.

Back to your artistic strategy. On the one hand, you declare your interest in the tradition of avant-garde culture and its reflections in social discourse as a whole. You seem to think of yourself as an offspring of that tradition. On the other hand, you cannot be part of a local avant-garde tradition, since Lithuania never had one. Therefore, it is only natural that you leave the cultural field behind and turn to those areas where there is more ample evidence of avant-garde movement. Your work deals with material that is usually not associated with cultural production. But you yourself do not leave the platform from which you make these excursions. You make use of issues that are foreign to the inner workings of the autonomous art world. You apply your artistic tools to them, moving them into your own territory. Your method may yet prove influential. It may encourage the insiders of cultural life to reflect on the ideas of the social avant-garde. This is, in fact, necessary for the development of our culture as a whole.

It is no coincidence, I think, that your preferred example of Lithuanian industrial society[as demonstrated in your film *Lietuvos Energija* (*Energy Lithuania*, 2000),] is a once-important electric power plant which is now almost idle. After all, Lenin’s words about “electrification of the whole country” as a necessary condition for building Communism was not a bad approximation of what fate had in store for the Soviet Union. What details did you focus on when you shot this film? What was your interest in the history of the town that was erected around the plant? Where did you find the “specific aesthetics” this time?

**DN:** I am not sure I agree with your statement about the unchanged Cold War ideology being applied to new enemies. When one of the two superpowers collapsed, the victorious side was quick to take advantage of its superiority. The victors replaced political and military confrontation vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc with a global strategy of collaboration, including earlier

subordinated zones of influence. The objective was to reintegrate these into Western circuits. In the last decade, there has been a movement towards cultural exchange with the former colonised world. On the art scene, scores of artists appeared from the Third World countries, which were not on the cultural “map” before. However, these intensified political, economic and cultural contacts between the metropolitan centres and the dominions of bygone periods also create unfortunate ambiguities for the countries in our part of the world. For two hundred years, we were politically and culturally colonised by Russia, but now Russia itself has been confined to the colonial periphery. And we have become stuck in a no man’s land, lacking strong historical ties to any of the cultural centres that are influential today.

You have described my strategies well, but I want to add yet another aspect, which is important in the quest for an avant-garde “tradition.” In several of my works (not only *Energy Lithuania* but also *His-story* and *Legendos išsipildymas* [*Legend Coming True*, 1999]), I left the traditional domains of culture behind to look for authentic stories in the recent past. I was asking questions which are important in art-world discourse, but I foresaw the possibility of finding answers in contexts outside of art. Their authenticity is not difficult to verify.

In this way, the social discourse in my works becomes invested with a certain historical value.

Like many of our colleagues from the West (and at least some of those from the former East), who were also born in the sixties or seventies, we should have inherited a capacity for expressing a radical and articulate political position, not avoiding taking risks if necessary. Unfortunately, such examples are hard to come by in Lithuanian art history. But they can be found in other spheres. You could even say that the uncompromising, idealistic attitude has been well known throughout our cultural history but never actively integrated into artistic practice. So, if we speak about the future of Lithuanian art, we must always take history into account. When I use stories from the past for my work, I am not engaging in an analysis of earlier periods. I am asking questions that have to do with art today.

When Elektrėnai (“Electric City”) was being built, Lenin and Stalin were both dead. The economic flourishing of the sixties and the overall industrialisation of Lithuania coincided with the political thaw in the Soviet Union. An increase in the capacity to produce electricity was one of the most important conditions for

ensuring continued investment into other branches of industry. The Soviet republics and regions competed fiercely for investments from the *Centre*. Once Lithuania got its powerful electricity plant, the development of many other industries was also guaranteed. This, in its turn, encouraged the further expansion of the energy system—the construction of new power plants, of an oil refinery, etc. In this way, Lithuania became one of the most dynamic and developed republics in the Soviet Union. The plant that led the way did not produce any material goods, only energy. This conditionality of industrial

production, this virtuality, the multilayered process through which energy is materialised, was my main interest. This was also the reason that the electric power plant spawned such a community around itself. In my film, we see the people who implemented this ideological construct. We see traces of their work, of their creativity even. But I also hope that signs of the once-powerful Great Idea will shine through in this document of everyday life.

Excerpted from *Deimantas Narkevičius: Lithuanian Pavilion, The 49th Venice Biennale*. Vilnius: Contemporary Art Centre, 2001.

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## Post-Research Notes: (Re)Search for the True Self-Managed Art

JELENA VESIĆ

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The theme of self-organisation has acquired wide currency in contemporary international art. Critical practitioners, working in a network culture in the wake of the absorption of institutional critique, often talk about producing new culture through cooperation and sharing, through platforms and networks, and through working outside “isolated” and “traditional” state-run institutions and their representative and repressive sociopolitical functions. Declarations of the value of self-organisation proliferate from an ever-increasing number of (so-called) “independent” cultural actors, regardless of their actual material ties to institutions of culture and governance. Despite such self-assuring claims of independence, the old Marxist question remains to be addressed: Do these newly won cooperative freedoms truly liberate us within the field of labour, power distribution, and social responsibility?

In the post-Yugoslavian context, the idea of an independent cultural scene brings with it numerous kinds of unease. Some are implied by the very name—independent—but also stem from, as I will show, *ongoing* discrepancies between nominal and actual positioning in the broad space of culture. Cultural systems in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, during the 1990s and later, were characterised by retrograde processes of the cultural re-nationalisation, on the one hand, and the introduction of market principles on the other. The

atomisation of the modernist public sphere has been followed by the atomisation of labour in the institutions of culture as well as in ever-increasing numbers of free actors without permanent employment.

The tendencies that began in the '90s have become intensified since the end of the Yugoslav wars and the establishment of democratic governments in the newly formed nation-states. The new “democratic regime” requested proactive cultural economies, supporting the idea that institutions that were previously wholly public in their funding and mission should enter into the market and become self-sustaining. Actors in the field of contemporary culture and education are expected to be invested in the constant reinvention of their own labour conditions, following the fashions of ever-changing cultural industries and attempting to find economic solutions in the system of project management, that is, projectisation in an EU context. These proactive, democratic cultural policies are most often connected with the participation in processes of European integration and collaborations with the various corporate foundation ventures for social responsibility.

The Marxist question, concerning the relationship between self-organisation and liberation, has been revisited in this context, with historical reflexivity, by two recent exhibition research projects which I address here: The Belgrade-based Prelom Kolektiv's

*Two Times of One Wall: The Case of the Student Cultural Centre (SKC)—Belgrade in the 1970s* (first exhibited at Gallery SKUC Ljubljana, May 2008)<sup>1</sup> and *Removed from the Crowd: Dissociative Association—Associations outside the programmatic collectivities in the art of the 1960s and 1970s in the Socialist Republic of Croatia* by the Zagreb-based Institute for Duration, Location and Variables (DeLVe) (first exhibited at the Museum of History of Yugoslavia, November 2009).<sup>2</sup> Both exhibitions focused on so-called “nonconformist” art (given the art-historical moniker New Artistic Practices)<sup>3</sup> and were comprised of different performative, conceptual, processual and dematerialising forms of artistic work. Both exhibitions explored critical artistic positioning in relation to the idea of collective, self-managed art in the context of socialist Yugoslavia. Both exhibitions also used this conceptual terrain for self-reflection, given that both organisations, Prelom and DeLVe, operate as self-organised collectives within a changed political landscape.

Prelom Kolektiv’s research exhibition *Two Times of One Wall* explored the flux between self-organisation and the institution. Treating the history of the Student Cultural Centre of Belgrade as an exemplary archive or case study, the exhibition consisted of images, texts, films, video testimonies, and researchers’ notes. DeLVe’s curatorial research exhibition *Removed from the Crowd* traced the history of artistic self-organisation and collective work, paying attention to artistic initiatives that took as their sites of action “streets, nature, bathing places, university buildings, house entrances, balconies, cellars and windows that are not only extra-institutional locations but places of

temporariness as well, which are also considered to be places of indefiniteness and, ultimately, as places with no programme.”<sup>4</sup>

Both exhibitions re-presented artistic work and thinking around artistic work by means of allusive montages of visual and textual material, associative diagrams, and fragmented art-historical narratives. Making rich (re)use of prior artist groups’ own particular decision-making and formats, each curatorial research project disclosed—with a different effective focus—the numerous contradictions permeating the complex net of relationships between the institution, state, community, and individual at particular historical moments, which informed the production of collectivity and artistic subjectivity in (post-)Yugoslavian societies.

### A Note on Self-Organisation

The common understanding of self-organisation points to a system without a central authority—a system that reveals itself through the calculated spontaneity of certain practices, ideally structured according to horizontal models of decision-making, power distribution, and forms of participation. At the same time, self-organised practices are nowadays assumed to oppose traditional institutional models and state apparatuses; as such, they are generally understood to be alternative and progressive in relation to the notion of modernist cultural institutions populated by the (oppressive) mechanisms of bureaucracy and hierarchy.

Prelom Kolektiv and DeLVe Institute returned to the practices of self-organisation and self-management in “really existing socialism” precisely in order to discuss their complexities, differences, and (sometimes) similarities with what we experience as compelling forms of self-organisation and self-management in the neoliberal present. This return also meant revisiting and challenging the binaries that often emerge in 20th-century art histories of Eastern Europe or geopolitical art histories of the countries of the socialist bloc, which have unfortunately been carried over into the broader sphere of art history to assume an almost universal character. One binary would encompass the concept of *authoritarian art* (variously allocated to socialist realism, Nazi *Kunst*, and fascist art, without any ideological differentiation) in

1 — Curators of the exhibition on behalf of Prelom Kolektiv were Dušan Grlja and the author in collaboration with Vladimir Jerić, Zorana Dojić, and Radmila Joksimović. Information on this exhibition exists online in the form of an exhibition notebook, video interviews, and audio materials edited by Prelom Kolektiv. See Prelom Kolektiv, “SKC in ŠKUC: The Case of Students’ Cultural Centre in the 1970s,” <http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/eng/PPYUart.htm>.

2 — DeLVe is comprised of Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača. The exhibition and research materials appear also in the form of “performative text.” See Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača (DeLVe), “Dissociative Association, Dionysian Socialism, Non-Action and Delayed Audience: Between Action and Exodus in the Art of the 1960s and 1970s in the Socialist Republic of Croatia,” in Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača in collaboration with Vesna Vuković (eds.), *Removed from the Crowd. Unexpected Encounters I. BLOK and DeLVe*. 2011. pp. 250–307.

3 — The term “New Artistic Practices” was introduced to the local context by art historian and critic Ješa Denegri, who used it for the first time in his essay following the exhibition *New Artistic Practice 1966–1978*, staged in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1978. The term was borrowed from the critical practice of Catherine Millet, who visited SKC Belgrade in 1971.

4 — Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača, “Removed from the Crowd: Dissociative Association—Associations Outside the Programmatic Collectivities in the Art of the 1960s and 1970s in the Socialist Republic of Croatia,” in Zorana Dojić and Jelena Vesić (eds.), *Political Practices of (Post-)Yugoslav Art*. Exhibition catalogue. Prelom Kolektiv. 2010. p. 100.

opposition to the concept of *free art* (attributed to various avant-gardes and modernisms); another binary would assume juxtaposition of the concept of *official art* (art considered to develop in accordance with the dictates or at least support of the state) with the concept of *alternative art* (understood as standing in direct contrast with the state, “hiding” in dark alternative spaces, artists’ apartments, or in nature, far from the eyes of the “general public”). Given that such simplistic and clichéd distinctions between institutional cultural work and self-organised work persist in various interpretations, it is clear that these presumed oppositions warrant some questioning and situated reflexivity.

Research is a search, a quest, the recipient of which exists in the present moment. It is always about actualisation. In the present moment, contemporary art workers (almost anywhere) encounter self-organisation in terms of a two-fold trap that must be negotiated daily: a sense of anxiety and grief over the loss of the social state combined with the enjoyment of mobility and freedom in the sense of avoiding the paternalistic controls of permanent employment, the boredom of an everyday repetitiveness, institutional confinement, and various impositions by the cultural bureaucracy.

The expanded terrain of research actualised by the two curatorial projects under discussion interrogated ideas of artistic liberation-by-self-organisation and self-management. What might it mean to lose not only the maternal but also the paternal protection of the state through a (pseudo-)severing of the bonds between state and capitalism, politics and economy, ideology and society, individual and collective?

In (re-)tracing their *own* histories of self-organised collaborative practice from the socialist past, the underlying investment for these two post-socialist self-organised collectives was in a deeper understanding of the transformation of the meaning and potential of collective work. DeLve foregrounded this by citing an early example of the same kind of questioning of “collective work” relations by the Zagreb-based group Gorgona, which consisted of nine artists and art historians operating along the lines of an anti-art agenda in Zagreb between 1959 and 1966:

Collective Work

CRITICAL-RATIONAL APPROACH

*Collective Work is the complete opposite of the efforts we are constantly making as*

*individuals: to affirm the person, who is confirmed and realized in their individual work. The individual testifies to his/her destiny. S/he cannot testify to someone else's without being untruthful and artificial. BUT, do I desire Collective Work all the same? I do. Is a Collective Work possible? I suppose that it would require a common goal and equality of thought and will. Kindred feelings, and some at least minimal common enthusiasm. A “constructive” Collective Work certainly also demands a common programme for the work.*<sup>5</sup>

In the contemporary moment, it is difficult not to be affected by this interrogation of collectivised self-organisation at the very level of a questioning of desire. The comparative restaging of the desire for collectivity, achieved by DeLve, foregrounded certain uncanny similarities, in tone and content, between the interests of alienated cultural workers working locally before and after the collapse of the Yugoslavian state.

### Locating Self-Organisation

How should we approach the concept of the self-organised state or the idea of self-management as the state's principle, as encountered in socialist Yugoslavia?

According to the social science researcher Marcelo Vieta, self-management can be described in terms of self-creation, self-control, self-provision, and ultimately, self-production.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, the very notion of the state would seem to mean something completely opposed to the terms of self-determination. Viewed from this angle, the state signifies a governed political entity or a social contract based on law and constitution—i.e., an organised political community living under a top-down structure of (representative) government. However, within the critical language of Marxism, we may find a way of unifying this opposition. Here, self-management is presented as a social process through which the state will wither away (given that socialism represents only a step

5 — This is an excerpt by Đuro Seder from 1963 from one of the “homeworks” that the members of Zagreb art group Gorgona used to exchange within the collective. (See Bago and Majača, 2011, op. cit., p. 260.) Seder formulated a “critical-rational approach” to the idea of collective work in order to challenge it with an ensuing exposition of a “Gorgonic approach,” which “mocked the preceding commonsensical and constructive premises, though in a way longing for them at the same time.”

6 — See Marcelo Vieta, *Autogestión and the Worker-Recuperated Enterprises in Argentina: The Potential for Reconstituting Work and Recomposing Life*. [http://yorku.academia.edu/MarceloVieta/Papers/549436/Autogestion\\_and\\_the\\_Worker-Recuperated\\_Enterprises\\_in\\_Argentina\\_The\\_Potential\\_for\\_Reconstituting\\_Work\\_and\\_Recomposing\\_Life](http://yorku.academia.edu/MarceloVieta/Papers/549436/Autogestion_and_the_Worker-Recuperated_Enterprises_in_Argentina_The_Potential_for_Reconstituting_Work_and_Recomposing_Life).

towards communism, with the socialist state as a transient stage in abandoning the concept of state altogether).<sup>7</sup> It is precisely this “withering of state” which seems to have obsessed the high-ranking politician and architect of self-managed Yugoslavian socialism Edvard Kardelj. His view of the self-managed system was expressed in the pluralism of self-managed interests.<sup>8</sup> In Kardelj’s view, rather than the political choices of organisation lying between single- or multi-party preferences, self-management was the promise of the choices and associations of socialism itself. Self-organisation allowed for a pluralism of interests that could be, in his words, “incomparably closer to the individual and immeasurably more democratic than any form of political party pluralism which alienates society as a whole from the real man and citizen, even though it decides ostensibly on behalf of the citizen.”<sup>9</sup>

This vision of self-management called for the opening up of spaces for the autonomous development of different spheres of work and life under the umbrella of collective politics (which, understandably, were emphatically differentiated from the plurality of interests characteristic of capitalist individualism). Within socialist Yugoslavia, the principles of self-management emerged in the process of ideological differentiation from both Soviet and Western models of the state. This became a critique not only of Stalinist bureaucratic hegemony and the (totalitarian) state apparatus but also of so-called representative democracy. Over time, self-management became the dominant ideology, which—in theory and in practice—encompassed all the social spheres: economy, politics, and culture.<sup>10</sup>

7 — Self-management, first theorised by P. J. Proudhon under the term *auto-gestion*, later became a primary component of some trade-union organisations; in particular it was a theme within revolutionary syndicalism, introduced in late 19th-century France.

8 — Kardelj wrote: “As far as Yugoslavia is concerned, the choice is not between multiparty pluralism or a one-party system, but rather between self-management, i.e., the democratic system of pluralism of self-management interests, or the multiparty system which negates self-management . . . The pluralism of interests is incomparably closer to the individual and immeasurably more democratic than any form of political party pluralism which alienates society as a whole from the real man and citizen, even though it decides ostensibly on behalf of the citizen.”

Edvard Kardelj, *Self-Management and the Political System*. Socialist Thought and Practice. 1981.

9 — Loc. cit.

10 — One of characteristics of socialist self-management was that the autonomous spheres of activity were proclaimed in the so-called Organisations of United Labour (“Organizacija udruženog rada,” famously abbreviated with the acronym “OUR”) presenting the “basic units” of the more complex mechanisms of a “self-managed labour system.” Another characteristic is that the idea of property also received its own novel definition;

In this context, workers’ self-management or “workers’ control” signified a process of decision-making in which workers themselves negotiated the circumstances of production, instead of being dependent upon the set of rules defined by an owner or manager-supervisor. Ideas from this period generated traces, echoes, and reformulations in cultural production, which may be seen in the rhetoric of the New Artistic Practices and their various direct or implied treaties of self-association. Furthermore, the insistence of some of the protagonists of these practices on the self-control and self-regulation of artists’ working conditions could almost be read—albeit with certain caveats—as a “politically correct” response to Kardelj’s proposition of applying the term “worker” to all the people, “no matter if they conduct physical or intellectual work, no matter if they are involved in material production of goods or other social activities.”<sup>11</sup>

In parallel with this appreciation of the connection between governance and culture, it is worth emphasising also that the term “working people” was used as a kind of euphemism for “citizenship” in former Yugoslavia. Thus, the ideology of self-management assumed that all citizens were workers and that all workers were citizens, and the very logic of equating the two designated Yugoslavia as a state of self-managed workers—that is to say, a self-organised state. The tendency to politicise work, which is inscribed into the idea of self-management, has been discussed at various levels. In Kardelj’s conception, work was considered to be not merely a measurable process of effectiveness and productivity in the service of state prestige or a given factory; it also implied knowledge of the circumstances of production and the (formal) possibility of continually influencing the development of the apparatus of production. In the context of managing the state, however, there was a pragmatic and strategic implementation of such principles. As might be expected, the postulates of self-management in state structures and institutions dissolved into bureaucratic standardisations and apologetic rhetoric, while the true practice of workers’ control, its critical

it was neither the classical socialist concept of *state property*, nor the capitalist concept of *private property*, but the new concept of social property, by which Yugoslavia remained distinctive in its specific model of socialism.

11 — Kardelj also called for the “free and self-determined advance towards all forms of mutual relations of collaboration and association, adequate to their production, economical, social, and other interests.” See *Pravci razvoja političkog sistema socijalističkog samoupravljanja*, pp. 26–27.

rethinking and self-reflection, happened in less officiated “elsewheres.”

As described above, one of the unexpected destinations for the problematisation of worker self-management was the sphere of artistic and intellectual work. This problematisation did not happen through official cultural policy programmes of self-management, which were often taken either too vaguely or too formally into the actual practices of various art unions and core governmental institutions, resulting in similarly vague understandings of the “relative autonomy of culture” and the “modernist tendency” to become the mainstream current of art, known as “socialist modernism.” These tendencies of art under socialism were criticised by the protagonists of New Artistic Practices because of the way in which they neutralised artistic language, reducing art’s potential to assume a critical position within society. It was this ongoing internal criticism that the curatorial case studies scrutinised.

### Self-Organisation–Institution– Self-Organisation

Prelom Kolektiv’s *Two Times of One Wall* traced the rich and divergent experience of an experimental institutional/self-organised practice that developed against the backdrop of the 1968 “march through the institutions”—i.e., developed in dialogue with international art activism and new institutionalism. The Student Cultural Centre (SKC) came into being as a result of the political activities of a group of young intellectuals and workers who had led the ’68 protests and were also engaged in the Students’ League. After the student protests, president Tito made the paradoxical, arguably assimilative, comment in his ambiguous claim: “The students are right!” At the end of the 1960s, the former building of the state security agency, which was undergoing reconstruction, was given to the Belgrade University and Student Association. The space started being used by young critics, curators, filmmakers, social theorists, and political activists, who established the Student Cultural Centre there.

Over time, SKC became well known for its annual international coming-together of artists, known as April Meetings—Festival of Expanded Media,<sup>12</sup> which established a reputation for being one of the rare “territories” that enabled

the exchange of ideas between artists and art critics from both sides of the Iron Curtain. During the 1970s, SKC hosted a large number of public discussions that dealt critically with the new politics of emancipation—from feminist movements to questions of decolonisation and the Non-Aligned Movement. Also in its organisation of “alternative Octobers”<sup>13</sup>—critical, programmatic responses to the *art pour l’art* orientation of the October Salon, one of the biggest state manifestations—SKC broadened debate and created a place of confrontation with state institutions of art.

The experimental counter-exhibition *October 75*, to which Prelom Kolektiv gave special consideration, gathered various cultural workers—critics, gallerists, and curators—to produce a series of critical public statements on the concept of self-managed art. The output from *October 75* was circulated in the form of a mimeographed script, which presented the proclamations of all the participants. As the following excerpts from the texts show, they sought no less than a truly self-managed and autonomous art.

### Dunja Blažević, curator of the SKC Gallery, head of the visual arts programme, writes:

*Art should be changed! As long as we leave art alone and keep on transferring works of art from studios to depots and basements by means of social regulations and mechanisms, storing them, like stillborn children, for the benefit of our cultural offspring, or while we keep on creating, through the private market, our own variant of the nouveau riche or Kleinbürgers, art will remain a social appendage, something serving no useful purpose, but something it is not decent or cultured to be without [...]*  
THE SELF-MANAGING SYSTEM OF  
FREE EXCHANGE AND ASSOCIATION OF  
LABOUR THROUGH SELF-MANAGING  
COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST  
REPRESENTS A NEW NON-OWNERSHIP  
RELATIONSHIP that examines and  
revises the existing models of artistic work  
and behaviour.

13 — Alternative Octobers were characteristic of the first five years of SKC activity and the cultural policy of the head of the visual art department, Dunja Blažević. Alternative Octobers were counter-exhibitions that coincided with, and were in critical dialogue with, the October Salon, the official state annual exhibition that carried a bourgeois prerogative of a salon and was of pure aesthetic orientation. Alternative Octobers were countering the October Salon also through their different use of, and behaviour in, the gallery space.

12 — Also translated as: “April Encounters: A non-traditional international art festival bringing together young artists and performers, beginning in 1972, on the occasion of 4 April, the Day of the Students of Belgrade, and the Day of the Student Cultural Centre.”



**Raša Todosijević, artist and member of the editorial board of SKC Gallery, writes:**

*A continual wish for a total autonomy of art is nothing else but its effort to attain a self-conscious and efficient functioning within the framework of its own language [...] It is only when functioning as a critique and self-analysis of its own language that art is capable of raising the issue of the analysis and critique of social practice and demanding its change [...] Art that celebrates victory stops fighting.*

The aim of the research of Prelom Kolektiv's *Two Times of One Wall* was to precisely locate, understand, and emphasise the complex tension between these poles of state/institution and movement/self-organisation. The material effects of the state's and students' agreement to situate the student movement under the roof of a state building at the conclusion of the 1968 protests was examined by this exhibition for the first time. SKC was placed within what we could term a dialectic between self-realisation and the pacification of social critique. As the Prelom Kolektiv's exhibition research showed—in part through interviews with the original protagonists of SKC and contemporary art historians interested in the New Artistic Practices—this unusual housing of the student movement tended to be interpreted in two seemingly contrasting ways. On the one hand, Dunja Blažević, the first curator of the visual arts department at SKC, considered the state-supported location to have been an authentic place of self-realisation, won out of struggle, embodying and ensuring different cultural expressions and the free circulation of critical visions by a new generation of conceptual artists from all parts of the world.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Miško Šuvaković, an aesthetic theorist who wrote on the New Artistic Practices and was part of the group 143, active in SKC during the second half of 1970s, saw the location as a smart control mechanism, instigated by the state, in which SKC presented a sort of organised margin or peripheral social laboratory, where critical ideas and practices could be detected, isolated, and thus put under control. As is often the case with competing interpretations of cultural processes, both are possible, or rather, one might say that SKC was

in a state of constant flux between these two poles, operating as both self-actualising agency and control mechanism.

As an expression of a multilayered and laminated rebellion, the SKC space in Belgrade was heterogeneous just as any other self-organisation without political leadership is essentially hybrid. It was the combination of leftist critical options—from French Maoism to Yugoslavian humanistic Marxism, feminism, and anti-colonial struggles, dissidence and liberalism, mysticism and nationalism, with a touch of soft hippie and, later, glam-punk subculture. What unified all these different stances was their critique of official state structures, which ranged from the radical left to liberal turns and proto-nationalisms (the latter gradually prevailed to become “official options” during the 1990s). In other words, in a less overt and more moderate, culturally specific form, SKC expressed a spectrum of critical views on the state, accumulated in various protests during the 1960s and 1970s.

Prelom Kolektiv was especially interested in tracing an artistic-cultural-political thread tied to the fluctuating dynamics of a leftist critique of the socialist state within SKC-associated practices, both inside and outside its permeable institutional walls. As heralded by the famous slogans from 1968—“We Fight Against Socialism with Socialism” and “Down with the Red Bourgeoisie”—the activities of SKC recapitulated, in different ways, the students' ongoing calls for abolishing rigid and hierarchical Communist Party politics and their demands for firmer rooting of socialist ideas in the field of everyday practice. These two slogans are exemplary of the kind of nonrepresentational and movement-based institutional formations (which seem to incorporate the institution's own exceptions and rejections) that are possible to categorise in the terms of a “performative institution.”

Prelom Kolektiv developed a particular thesis on, and took special interest in, the corporality and performativity of the institution of SKC. Prelom Kolektiv's exhibition research considered that SKC's so-called “cultural policy” could be best understood by observing the processual distribution of ideas from the student protests within the broader cultural field, and in SKC's role over time in becoming a kind of alternative university for its protagonists. In the work of SKC, Prelom Kolektiv identified the (performative) claim that alternative institutions are primarily comprised of the people involved

14 — See the interviews with Dunja Blažević and Miško Šuvaković in Jelena Vesić and Dušan Grijša (eds.), *The Case of the Student Cultural Centre in the 1970s*. Exhibition catalogue, 2008. pp. 81–90. Accessible at: <http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/pdf/catalogue.pdf>.

and only secondarily by formal structures. This notion of performativity is best exemplified by a photograph of Milan Jožić, which Prelom Kolektiv took as the institutional representation of SKC. It shows the artists, critics, curators, and friends—protagonists of the New Art Practices—leaning, side by side in a straight line, against the wall of SKC's gallery.

The photograph shows people who *used to be there* (to paraphrase Roland Barthes),<sup>15</sup> used to be that institution, who made SKC precisely what it was through their permanent presence, withholding it from the institutional map of classical artistic venues of their time and contrasting it to the ideology of the “white cube,” with its restrictive and controlled conventions of observation and contemplation of artworks, etc. The frontal positioning is not insignificant to the tactical composites of artist-collaborators. The art critic Ješa Denegri has noted a particular investment within the New Artistic Practices in the “artist in the first person,” describing processes of subjectivisation that make it possible to connect aspects of performativity and processuality in artistic work to the position of direct speech at the borders of art and life. This conceptual commitment to “lived” and embodied ideas placed artists of the group in the position to be both (so-called) “true believers” and “fierce critics” of the ideology of self-management.

The term “performative institution” is used here in another related sense to describe an institution in which not only the representatives of formal institutional structures (managers, programme editors, designers, archivists, etc.) but also numerous other individuals (who acted in the same space, through self-organised structures) take part in actualising programming decisions through new formations of editorial boards, councils, and groups. This kind of performativity might be recognised as the sum of all the institution's departures from the classical national welfare-state institution (i.e., an art museum), which expresses its power in terms of guardianship over a disembodied art-historical canon or, indeed, as disembodied canon-building. To call an institution “performative” and to observe its performativity in this manner is, therefore, to acknowledge the impossibility of placing the entirety of its practices on either side of the binary opposition

between institution and self-organisation. This division is often used as a euphemism for another rigid opposition—that between “official” and “alternative” art—which, as I have already mentioned, is frequently employed as the main epistemological tool within recent readings of the cultural histories of the countries of “real socialism.”

In contrast to such art-historical shorthand, research by Prelom Kolektiv revealed SKC as an example of an approach to collectivity that generates a different model of production, which may be expressed through the formula: *self-organisation–institution–self-organisation*.<sup>16</sup> This means that, when viewed durationally, the strength or volatility of the organisation's self-organising productions were built upon the foundations of a self-organised generation-in-protest. This created the conditions for establishing a new institution “from above,” which enabled further support from the state but which, at the same time, paradoxically, fed the self-organised critique of state-based self-organisation. What I am labouring over here is not the historical series of events (again) but the *formula* of a dialectical re-production of criticality around self-organisation, which funnelled “1968's communitarian modus operandi towards a range of practices and projects of self-organization tarrying (and not) with its very own ‘institutional roof.’”<sup>17</sup> In this case then, performativity comprehends a movement beyond dualisms, which SKC contained within itself: as an “institution (but) of movement,” as a “self-organised institution,” and as an “institution (but) of critique,” and so forth. Such performativity appears almost as a substance that could corrode the firmness of the institution's walls and internally dismantle the elitism, isolation, and self-sufficiency of a classic institutional space with respect to everyday life and sociability “from below.”

16 — See Jelena Vesić, “SKC (Student Cultural Centre) as a Site of Performative (Self-)Production: October 75—Institution, Self-Organisation, First Person Speech, Collectivisation,” *Život Umjetnosti*, 2012.

17 — This formula could be applied to the economic, cultural, and political background of SKC, which presented one hybrid institutional model, close to the contemporary concept of “open institutionalism.” See Teodor Celakoski, Miljenka Buljević, Tomislav Medak, Emina Višnić (eds.), *Open Institutions: Institutional Imagination and Cultural Public Sphere*. 2011. SKC was partly funded from the side of the state, partly forced to employ entrepreneurial activity (i.e., dependent on fundraising and a proactive attitude towards its own sustainability), and partly drew upon voluntary and self-organised work. These tendencies appear to be very close to contemporary defunding of public institutions within public budgets, and to the attempts of new self-organised and project-based institutions to “force” the state to take part in their operations and sustainability.

15 — Barthes's idea that photography does not represent memory, an imagination, a reconstitution (...), but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. Hill and Wang, 1981. p. 82.

### “Being With”: Individual–Collective–State

If Prelom Kolektiv focused on vacillating conceptions of SKC in relation to collective work, then DeLVe considered an apparently different set of inclinations towards communitarian practices within a shared framework of ideas and practices. *Removed from the Crowd* emphasised the elusive strategy of fleeing, of being in a constant state of escape from any kind of normative social contract. As the exhibition-project argued, such “escape” was always caught in a relational bind and could, therefore, only be the product of a two-way relationship (or, at least, a relationship “towards”). This may be seen not only in the complex relationship between the individual and the collective but also in the common mechanism in which, even if it remains “hidden,” the presence of the state marks a departure point from which this impulse to escape begins.

DeLVe’s curatorial research introduced the concept of “nonprogrammatic association” as a figure of resistance to functional, operative and measurable artistic work in the practices they re-curated. Nonprogrammatic association signifies the capacity, and implies the need, for self-regulation of one’s own artistic production and distribution. The narrative of self-organised artistic initiatives and the history of artistic association elaborated by DeLVe particularly foregrounded notions of community and temporality, and the connection between these in self-organised modes. This curatorial research attended to the paradoxical enjoyment that exists for artists in the connection between action, work, and life, and in an art that inevitably betrays and overcomes its own functionality and use value. DeLVe created an associative cartography of historical facts that entered into dialogue with the contemporary context of cultural work.

According to the curators, this cartographic sequencing of texts and images created a “series of speculations derived from the enlargement of details, deliberate omissions, arbitrary connections, all in the aid of articulating a different viewpoint, a temporary and unstable truth through a different ‘performance’ of the writing of the history of contemporary art.”<sup>18</sup> DeLVe saw their curatorial method as providing “fragmentary interventions” into existing art-historical and museological narratives based on artistic excellence and individual oeuvres. Indeed, in this curatorial research, these interventions occurred precisely through the

curators’ shift away from exhibiting artworks, focusing instead on the organisational activities of artists and artistic communities and the circumstances of their production. Instead of showing one particular work of, for example, Mladen Stilinović or Julije Knifer or Sanja Iveković or Braco Dimitrijević, they focused on the artists’ participation in different conversations, or gestures that were rarely presented as a singular artwork or as part of the oeuvre of a singular artist.

The operational principle of “being with,” which the curators of DeLVe took from Jean-Luc Nancy’s theory of community, was explored by considering two tactics that mark the opposite poles of this approach. One is the escape into what could be called “surreal life,” epitomised in the proverbial Gorgonic declaration: “Sometimes Gorgona did nothing, it just lived.”<sup>19</sup> Another approach was that of practising “direct speech” in the artist-run space Podroom—The Working Community of Artists, which entailed continual reflection upon the ideas and conditions of work and the group’s reasons for establishing mutual relationships in the form of community. This negotiation could also be seen as a process of searching for the social contract, a kind of internalisation of the ideological role of the state. Two excerpts from the debate held in Podroom and published in the group’s magazine, *Prvi broj* [First Issue] (one of the central case studies in DeLVe’s research) may be cited to illustrate two different tactics of this internalisation. Here, Stilinović fantasises about the possibility of total separation from the state and state institutions of art, while Goran Petercol’s self-critical view manifests deep scepticism about the possibility of escape to some projected externality.<sup>20</sup>

#### Mladen Stilinović:

*I work in Podroom because I am responsible for what I do. When we act through the other galleries or newspapers it is them (not me) who think they are responsible for my work. That bothers me, and it cannot be true. Besides, I like that my work is being presented completely, that is, exactly as I envisioned it, from the poster and catalogue to the duration of the exhibition and how the works are stored. I really like that sentence by Aretino, the one*

19 — Josip Vaništa, cited in Bago and Majača, 2011, op. cit., p. 268.

20 — For a detailed discussion of Podroom in relation to these issues, see Ivana Bago, “A Window and a Basement: Negotiating Hospitality at La Galerie Des Locataires and Podroom—The Working Community of Artists,” *ARTMargins* 1 (2:3), pp. 116–46.

that says “to be alive means never going to the Court.” When I go to other institutions, I feel like going to the Court. When I go to Podroom, then I go to Podroom [...] ]

#### Goran Petercol:

However, there is another thing that seems to me very problematic, that we still act like a gallery for the artists we invite . . . we give them space, and through exhibiting here, they support the idea of Podroom. But then, this happens: when they make an exhibition, we have to wait until someone remembers to ask them whether they would come back and make another exhibition in a year or two or not. This is a kind of relationship typical of a gallery: what’s offered is the space, and the honor, to exhibit, but cooperation isn’t on offer. We should treat them on an equal basis . . . I think what happened here is a certain accumulation of power based on the past; that is, on the fact, the merit, that two years, a year and a half ago, we founded Podroom . . . and in addition to that, we own the space, that is, it so happened that we got the space . . .<sup>21</sup>

Removed from the Crowd isolated traces of a quest for solidarity—the forms of “being with”—separating them out from primary and secondary materials. In this precise way, the project presented itself as “a search for the history of searching,”<sup>22</sup> for the history of sharing and constituting a common, thinking, and practicing self-organisation. The curatorial enquiry became a quest towards achieving a new understanding of the relations between the individual and the collective and of the meaning of collectivity in the different present moments, without resigning similar efforts to a resolutely past presentational moment, i.e., the “archive.”

#### Self-Organisation and Its Discontents (From Art to State and Back)

Insights stemming from these curatorial research projects by the Prelom Kolektiv and DeLve may be useful for thinking further through the politics of being self-organised. In regard to the practices encompassed by these two research projects, we can speak of an ideology that alternative workers in culture shared with the official political establishment as it was paradoxically embedded in, for example, the concept of “Fighting Socialism with Socialism.”

In a sense, we can speak of the artistic groups and the state ideologists making a mutual “response” to the proposition of self-management. Further, we cannot lose sight of the different practices (and therefore politics) through which this “response” was manifested and distributed across the spheres of the “alternative” and the “official.”

Locally, but also globally, these questions from the past gain new relevance today, framed as they are by the disappearance of the public good and of the public institution of art which characterised the welfare-state regime more broadly. The retreat of the social security system is happening in parallel with the expansion of individual entrepreneurship, which is currently unfolding at an ever-faster pace. In the region of the former Yugoslavia, the majority of cultural workers active today (both locally and internationally) are choosing, or are being compelled to adopt, self-organised forms of existence, acting through small collectives, troupes, groups, and alternative education projects. They are forming an alternative cultural sector—as so-called “independent” initiatives—characterised by flexible and precarious working conditions as well as mobile and adaptable forms of life.<sup>23</sup>

These free actors—whose freedom is, of course, very much conditional—still tend to ground their position of relative independence through disidentifications with the nation-state and with the traditional, professionalised division of labour.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, they are restoring interest in the working process, re-thematising and shaping cultural working practices in a space that we experience as more public, more democratic, and more collectivist. This is happening in the region for the first time since the 1970s.

The transition from “really existing socialism” (as the social grounds of operation for the art of the 1960s and 1970s disclosed within these projects) to liberal democracy and a free-market economy (i.e., “really existing capitalism”) can also be seen as the ultimate victory of self-organisation and oppressive self-care. This implies a transition from “childish immaturity”

23 — For example, the network of independent initiatives *Druga Scena* in Belgrade or *Clubture Network* for self-sustainability of independent initiatives in Croatia. <http://www.clubture.org>.

24 — For example, an artist performs his work as an initial potential value; a curator, historian, or critic increases the value through the elaboration of contents, through exhibiting and presence in the space of evaluation; and, in the end, the work is purchased by the museum, while its price, or money, or compensation, in this case, is the sum of all the values of the collective work which participates in this process.

21 — *Prvi Broj* [First Issue], cited in *ibid.*, p. 132.

22 — Bago and Majača, 2010. *Op cit.* p. 100.

to “full maturity,” in taking responsibility for one’s own beliefs and actions, life and work. Achieving such full maturity today means becoming a truly entrepreneurial individual—simultaneously being one’s own labour force and employer, one’s own financial and PR manager, creating rather than finding jobs, “self-organising” one’s health security and pension plan. In short, it means acting as a kind of “funky businessman” in contemporary “karaoke capitalism.”<sup>25</sup>

In this context, the apparent political confinement of artistic projects by a new generation of self-organised cultural workers is a consequence of the (extreme) reformist backdrop against which they exist or perform. On the one hand, the tendency of cultural workers to self-organise can be read as a process of the genuine creation of microspaces or microfields of better and fairer communities. On the other hand, they are firmly tied to the system of project-based art and largely vulnerable to attacks of the regulatory powers of the art market.

25 — See Prelom Kolektiv, “The Neoliberal Institution of Culture and the Critique of Culturalization,” *Transversal*. EIPCP, 2007. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0208/prelom/en>.

The curatorial research projects by DeLve Institute and Prelom Kolektiv demonstrate that the principles of self-organisation cannot be thought of in terms of politics per se, or merely as direct opposition to dominant institutionalisms. Quite the contrary—to paraphrase Godard’s frequently cited “making art politically rather than political art”—it is necessary to think of self-organisation politically. In this sense, then, we may also question our participation in the production of culture through self-organised initiatives, social networks, and temporary collectives, and through identifications as flexible individuals. Do we embody a new kind of transformative social critique that could, by analogy with our self-organised predecessors, be expressed by the slogan “We Fight Against Capitalism with Capitalism”? Is this quest for a more just capitalism at the same time a move towards a naturalised turning of (self-)exploitation into passion, a move that fits perfectly with the idealised image of new globally networked happy workers?

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## Art and State: From Modernism to the Retro-Avant-Garde

IGOR ZABEL

I would like to suggest in this paper that from the 1950s onward there was a particular symbiosis in Yugoslavia between modernist art and the party-and-state apparatus, as I will call it here. Not only did this apparatus tolerate and even support modernist artists but it often even used modernism for its own public image. (I am mainly referring to the situation in Slovenia, but in other former Yugoslav republics the situation was, in general, comparable.)

I will, however, start much later, in 1987, with the so-called Poster Scandal. A group of designers called the *Novi kolektivizam* (NK, New Collectivism) won the competition for the visual concept of “Youth Day,” which was one of the major socialist festivals in Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup> Part

of the concept was a proposal for a poster that was supposed to be distributed and displayed all over the country. The proposal, which showed a naked young man with a baton in one hand and the flag of Yugoslavia in the other, was accepted by a federal Youth Day committee, but

for a long time it was not clear when Tito’s real birthday was, but it was certainly not May 25.) The official interpretation was that Tito modestly declined a celebration of himself and proposed to celebrate the youth of Yugoslavia instead. Of course, this was an ideological operation that was far from modest. He remained at the core of the celebrations, as an almost mythical figure connected with the idea of youth, spring, new life and the future.

Every year at these semi-religious events, Yugoslav youth symbolically repeated the solemn oath to follow Tito and his way.

The most essential part of the festival was a relay run right across the country in which young people (workers, students, peasants, soldiers, etc.) took part. They passed from hand to hand a baton with greetings for Marshal Tito’s birthday (which also included formulas about fidelity to Tito, Yugoslavia, socialism, the Non-Aligned Movement, the system of self-management, etc.).

The baton was finally given to Tito at a huge event in a large stadium in Belgrade. It was considered a great honor to be the last bearer of the baton.

1 — Youth Day was celebrated on May 25 and was, in fact, the celebration of Tito’s birthday. (It is perhaps interesting that



afterward, when it was published in the newspapers, somebody discovered that it was an exact copy of a Nazi *Kunst* work by one Richard Klein, titled *The Third Reich*—with one significant difference: all the Nazi symbols had been replaced by Yugoslav symbols.

This event prompts at least two interesting questions, which are actually interconnected. The first question refers to the method of the NK group, described by the artists as the “retro-principle.” The second question is: how could such a controversial group (it was obvious in advance that the NK group itself as well as the whole movement of the *Neue slowenische Kunst* [NSK, New Slovenian Art], to which it belongs, was highly controversial) win a competition for such an important and ideologically delicate commission? (As a matter of fact, the Youth Day poster was not the first provocation by the NK group. A few years earlier they had designed a poster advertising youth labor brigades for the Socialist Youth of Slovenia. The poster included a detail from a sculpture by [Nazi sculptor] Arno Breker. Nevertheless, nobody had uncovered—or had wanted to uncover—this provocation.)

The two questions are closely connected. Let me start with the “retro-principle” as a working method and “retro-gardism” (or “retro-avant-gardism,” both terms are used) as the ideological position of the group. “Retro-principle” implies not only the use of already-given forms and models for new needs but also a conscious political position on which this appropriation is based. This position is made clear by one of the key statements of the rock group Laibach in the early 1980s: “Art and totalitarianism are not mutually exclusive. Totalitarian regimes abolish the illusion of revolutionary individual artistic freedom. LAIBACH KUNST is the principle of conscious rejection of personal tastes, judgment, convictions, [...] free depersonalization, voluntary acceptance of the role of ideology, unmasking and recapitulation of the regime ‘ultramodernism.’” Laibach adds: “He who has material power has spiritual power, and all art is subject to political manipulation, except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation.”<sup>2</sup> So the retro-principle is essentially a strategy used in the conditions of political manipulation of art; in this case, against the attempt of the “regime” to appropriate a contemporary phenomenon such as the NSK for its own needs, just as it had previously

appropriated “apolitical,” “ultramodernist” art. It is therefore necessary to answer the second question—i.e., how was it possible for the NK group to win the competition for the Youth Day concept?

I believe that at least part of the answer lies in the fact that there was already a long tradition in Yugoslavia of giving important commissions to modernists and other innovative artists (the Socialist Youth had a particular role in this respect). Giving the commission to the NK group was clearly a continuation of this tradition.

An incredibly fast change in the cultural policy in Yugoslavia between the late 1940s and the early 1950s can be illustrated with some examples from the institution where I work, Moderna galerija Ljubljana. The new exhibition space of the museum was opened in 1947 with an exhibition presenting four masters of Soviet socialist realism (including Aleksandr Gerasimov and Aleksandr Deyneka). Of course, the exhibition was generally praised as a perfect example of socialist art that should be followed by Slovene artists. A short time later, Moderna galerija began to prepare a historical show of Slovene impressionist painters, and there was a strong negative reaction in the more conservative party circles. This art was accused of being reactionary, bourgeois, *l'art-pour-l'art*-istic and thus generally unacceptable for the new society. Nevertheless, the exhibition had its supporters, which included intellectuals and artists who had outstanding positions in society and in the party itself, and the exhibition was opened in spring 1949. Just a few years later, in spring 1953, the same institution opened the first postwar exhibition of abstract art in Slovenia (by Stane Kregar and Riko Debenjak). It is understandable that there were vivid discussions and also furious criticisms, but, as far as I know, no real political pressure comparable to the pressure in the case of the impressionist exhibition. In a bare five years, cultural politics had changed completely. Let us keep in mind that this first show of abstract art in Slovenia did not take place in any alternative or marginal venue but in a central state institution that had an important function for cultural politics; we can therefore conclude that abstract art was not only tolerated but directly promoted by official policy. After that, modernist art, both abstract and figurative, flourished, and this development continued into the 1960s and 1970s. An important aspect of this development was a serious attempt to enter the Western art world and the international art market. (In the 1950s, Western art was becoming known through exhibitions and the newly

2 — “Neue slowenische Kunst,” *Problemov* 23 (1985, special issue), p. 6.

established Graphic Biennial. Later, artists gradually began to exhibit in an international context in museums and in commercial galleries in France, Italy and Germany. In the late 1960s, a group called Group 69, consisting of prominent modernist artists, was formed, proclaiming that its essential goal was to compete in the international art market.)

What made such a development possible? The history of Yugoslavia has not yet been sufficiently researched and many details of its political history remain to be clarified; I am sure that further research could considerably expand our knowledge about the position of modernism after the 1950s as well. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the development of modernism in the 1950s was somehow connected with the growing power of the more liberal and enlightened wings of the Communist Party, especially after the break with the Soviet Union in 1948. This break certainly did not have merely ideological and cultural consequences. Above all, it was a matter of economic survival and military security. Yugoslavia was therefore forced to open itself to the West, and to develop an economic and cultural system compatible with the new situation (which would not, however, endanger the basic elements of socialism, the position of Tito himself, etc.); parallel to this development, the power of the liberal elites inside the system was growing, and I would like to suggest that the importance of modernism was somehow connected to this development. The increasing power of the party liberals culminated in the 1960s, when they even started to think about a "socialist market system," workers' shareholdings, etc. In the early 1970s, however, they were replaced by Tito and the more conservative party members.

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that Yugoslav cultural politics were not liberal and permissive in every case. Obviously, there were important differences between liberals and those who were more conservative (many of them remained influential in the cultural field as well). The relationship toward modernism changed according to the time. There was an attack on modernist art in a speech Tito made in 1963, which was not without consequences, although it did not really endanger this art.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, there was also a campaign

against elitism in the arts, proclaiming slogans like "art for working people" and "we are all artists." (It is nevertheless interesting that possible references for such a position are not only the highly ideological positions of conservative party ideologists but also contemporary radical and left-oriented movements in the arts in the West.) One can generally say that apolitical and formalist modernist art was clearly supported. The relationship with more critical representative art (not so much in the visual arts, but in literature, film, etc.) was much more tense and uncertain. And any sort of liberalism ended where a possibility for a political opposition was noted.

But modernism was not only supported by the party-and-state apparatus; it was accepted as its own visual style. This is especially clear if we look at the number of monuments to the revolution and to the partisans that were directly commissioned by the apparatus and, of course, directly controlled by it. As early as the 1950s, not only socialist realism but any academic realistic tradition became outdated in monumental sculpture. In this kind of sculpture the 1950s can be seen as a transitional period from the realist models of around 1950 to modernist figurative and abstract models of around 1960. This development continued in the 1960s with several modernist monuments, some of them of very large dimensions.

It is interesting, however, that in the 1970s, when the liberal leaders were replaced by conservatives and when Yugoslavia turned much more toward the East again, modernism and other innovative artistic forms retained their central position; the movement of the "reideologization" of Yugoslav society, moreover, used these forms as well as the language of contemporary popular culture directly for its needs. In this context, some really huge monuments by leading modernist sculptors were constructed.

In 1980, Yugoslavia appeared at the Venice Biennale with these very works. The theme of the pavilion was large monuments, which were actually modernist landscape sculptures. It was one of the occasions when the link between modernism and the party-and-state apparatus became especially clear. The pavilion system of the Venice Biennale, similar to the structure of a trade fair, indicates that the selected artists actually represent their countries. In selections from 1980 onward, Yugoslavia was presented as a country that combined the socialist system with a high level of modernist art; such a combination indicated that the structure of Yugoslav

3 — It is known that Tito was no lover of modernist and abstract art. It seems, however, that this attack on abstract art was connected to another political turn. This was the time of political reconciliation between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The campaign against the modernists could represent part of the preparations for this reconciliation, especially as Khrushchev himself had attacked abstract artists only a short time before.

society was open, dynamic and contemporary (which was, at that time, certainly not true).

This was the context of the Youth Day poster scandal. New Collectivism's project was a result of their reflection on the symbiosis between modernism and the regime since the 1950s. In their view, the mistake of modernism was that it had declared itself apolitical, pure and autonomous. This is exactly why it could be used for political aims. Today we often hear that modernist sculptors simply used state commissions to build large sculptures that were supposedly just pure, autonomous works of art, untouched by their actual function and context. This is simply not true, and here I agree with the retro-gardists. A pure form that is called a monument of the revolution is not a pure form anymore. (What is more, the reading of the form itself is determined by the tradition of monumental sculpture; sometimes, we even find very traditional monumental clichés in these sculptures—however, in an abstract form.)

The retro-avant-gardists knew well the writings of Max Kozloff, Eve Cockroft and other researchers of modernism who have pointed

to the fact that modernist art was directly used in Cold War politics. And as they looked back at the long tradition of symbiosis between modernism and politics in Yugoslavia, retro-gardists discovered that modernism, exactly because it was so “pure” and apolitical, could be made use of by different political and ideological systems. It is the particular political and ideological context that determines its actual role and significance. In this respect, therefore, it is not essentially different from traditional monumental art. Once we “purify” Richard Klein's work of Nazi symbols, we get a work with no particular content, an “abstract” work. By giving it other symbols, we can recontextualize it and give it completely different meaning. And this is how the retro-avant-garde was “using the language of political manipulation to avoid this manipulation.”

Sourced from “Atlas of Transformation.” Accessed online: <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/r/retro-avant-garde/art-and-state-from-modernism-to-the-retro-avant-garde-igor-zabel.html>.

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## Open Space of the Future: An Interview with David Maljković and What, How & for Whom (Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović)

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**WHAT, HOW & FOR WHOM:** The series of your videos and video installations *Scene for a New Heritage* originated around [Vojin] Bakić's monument on Petrova Gora. How did you become interested in Bakić?

**DAVID MALJKOVIĆ:** I already had basic information about Bakić, but the real interest started to arise with the resurrection of [memories in connection with] the location of the monument on Petrova Gora. This place is a part of the collective memory of my generation, and during the 1980s, it was regularly visited by schools, scouts. My cinematographer, to begin with, who was born in 1980 and had never heard of the monument on Petrova Gora, was completely amazed when he first saw it. I was

interested in what happens to memory and heritage that is [more or less forgotten]. At that time, in 2003, I was living between Amsterdam and Zagreb, and on one occasion I visited Petrova Gora and saw that the site was rather neglected. [. . .] Its only function now was to be the location of a Croatian Television repeater. I understood this site as a place of fascinating absence. [. . .] That's when I started to work on the screenplay for the video.

**WHW:** So you discovered Bakić as an artist through an interest in personal and collective memory and through the site of Petrova Gora?

**DM:** I was already familiar with his work, but that was the first time I got into it with more focus. Bakić is undoubtedly one of our greatest

sculptors, and Petrova Gora one of our greatest modernist monuments. This is subjective, and perhaps I am personally very attached to this monument, but I believe that it stands without competition. In regard to the form and dynamics that it possesses, I cannot recall any other monument that could be its rival.

**WHW:** In some installations, you also include Bakić's sculptures, sketches, and models of Petrova Gora.

**DM:** The documentary part of the installation that I sometimes exhibit is comprised of materials that I borrowed from the Bakić family as well as materials that I found scattered around the location of Petrova Gora itself. For example, I discovered documents on the decision in 1976 to build the monument, the list of laborers' wages in 1986, and similar objects. All the objects were in a dirty and messy condition, so I collected the things wearing gloves and made a selection at home. The Bakić family was very cooperative, and they lent me two of his models from the 1970s—one work model in plaster, and one that served for the building of the monument itself. There are other models that I saw in publications but that I wasn't able to find in physical form. These were the models of the whole mountain area, while the ones that I found were reduced to a "sculptural" presentation of the building of the memorial. I jointly showed this genesis that points to both the documentary and fictitious aspect within my work.

**WHW:** Was Bakić important to you as a major representative of universal modernism, in which he engaged with his work [...]?

**DM:** The most important thing for me was the personal memory that connected me with the site, while the historical part and Bakić's place in it, all of this started to emerge by itself. I tried as much as I could to use the open space of the future. I was dealing with neither the historical nor the political, since these elements already exist in the monument itself and the location of Petrova Gora, so I didn't feel the need to emphasize or manipulate them; they are simply here, strongly present all by themselves. Petrova Gora in the 1990s, the partisan hospital, King Peter . . . I was more interested in how to recreate all these elements in some new way than in how to use them with their already-existing qualities and examine them on a documentary level. I likewise wasn't interested in the advent of modernism in Yugoslavia and Croatia in some general sense; that is not a relationship that motivates me personally. Rather, it was

creating new platforms for all of this together that was very motivating for me.

**WHW:** Why are the videos taking place in the future, and on symbolically significant dates? In *Scene for a New Heritage 1*, the story takes place on May 25, 2045; in *Scene for a New Heritage 2*, the date is November 29, 2063; only in the third part is the future not specified.

**DM:** I had a need to express the contents that this space has, as well as its relationships and discontinuities. I wanted to address people's inability to communicate with this place. However, having in mind that the inability to communicate with this place exists in the present, I thought that it should be positioned in the future, because of other subjects, in order to unpack the complete contents that this architectural complex carries with itself. In the third part, I started to determine some year in the future, but I also thought of some references [to the past], of 1971. Nevertheless, when I began visiting the location more often, I saw that the visitors were present there, in very small numbers admittedly, but people go there, families with children, picnickers . . . I had a subtitle for this piece: *New visitors—visitors forever*, but then I decided to leave it out completely, as well as the year and any specific date. I wanted to leave this final part of the work totally open; the action can take place either before or after. And I wasn't striving to establish communication with the place at all costs, to work on some forced communication between the visitors and the monument. That is why in the third part I brought picnickers, campers, people that spend time there without asking what this place is and what's going on there. I wasn't developing a relationship between the visitors and the site anymore, but allowed them to develop a personal relationship toward the place, some kind of directedness or lack of directedness towards it.

**WHW:** The cycle *Scene for a New Heritage* develops what you call "new platforms for new visitors"; it is trying to offer a vision for the future. How do you see the monument's possibilities in the future?

**DM:** For someone who doesn't know the whole story around the monument on Petrova Gora and all its complex relationships, this can be anything. This is why, while working on the first collages, I went the farthest into fiction. It offered new platforms for new visitors, dislocations of the monument and the object. These collages have a utopian tone; they seem more

like an irritation or a question than like a concrete solution. Concerning the concrete solution for the monument, this should be done by a team of experts. But I haven't received any information that something like this is taking place. In the era of communism, schools and community offices regularly organized excursions to Petrova Gora, but today it is a big question how to stimulate the audience to visit this place of their own free will, as no one can be forced. A question arises whether this object should be used to some other purposes, perhaps turned into a more closed type of institute. There are different options, but all must take into consideration that the location is far away from the majority of events.

**WHW:** What do you think is happening to Bakić's heritage?

**DM:** Political turmoil always suppresses one part of history, and here Bakić has become invisible, not only because of the monuments. Some of them are completely demolished, like the monument to revolutionary victory in Kamenska, which, as I've heard, was demolished only after several attempts, it was that well built . . . One part of history has been neglected, and the treatment towards this heritage is bad, and all of this is being concealed so that questions won't be raised as to how to account for such treatment.

**WHW:** Do you feel that it is important for this part of art history and history in general to be reappraised?

**DM:** Not only for this part of history but it is important for every history to be present in continuity, because if it isn't so it will constantly ambush us at some other corner, and these surprises are never pleasant.

**WHW:** When you present *Scene for a New Heritage* abroad, do they ask you about the monument?

**DM:** There is generally more interest for *Scene for a New Heritage* abroad than there is around here. In principle, Bakić's monument is experienced in the universal manner; the people abroad are not unfamiliar with the architectural form itself. People often think that the monument emerged in the era of Frank Gehry, and it is interesting and unusual to them that the state is simply not paying more attention to such a special site and monument.

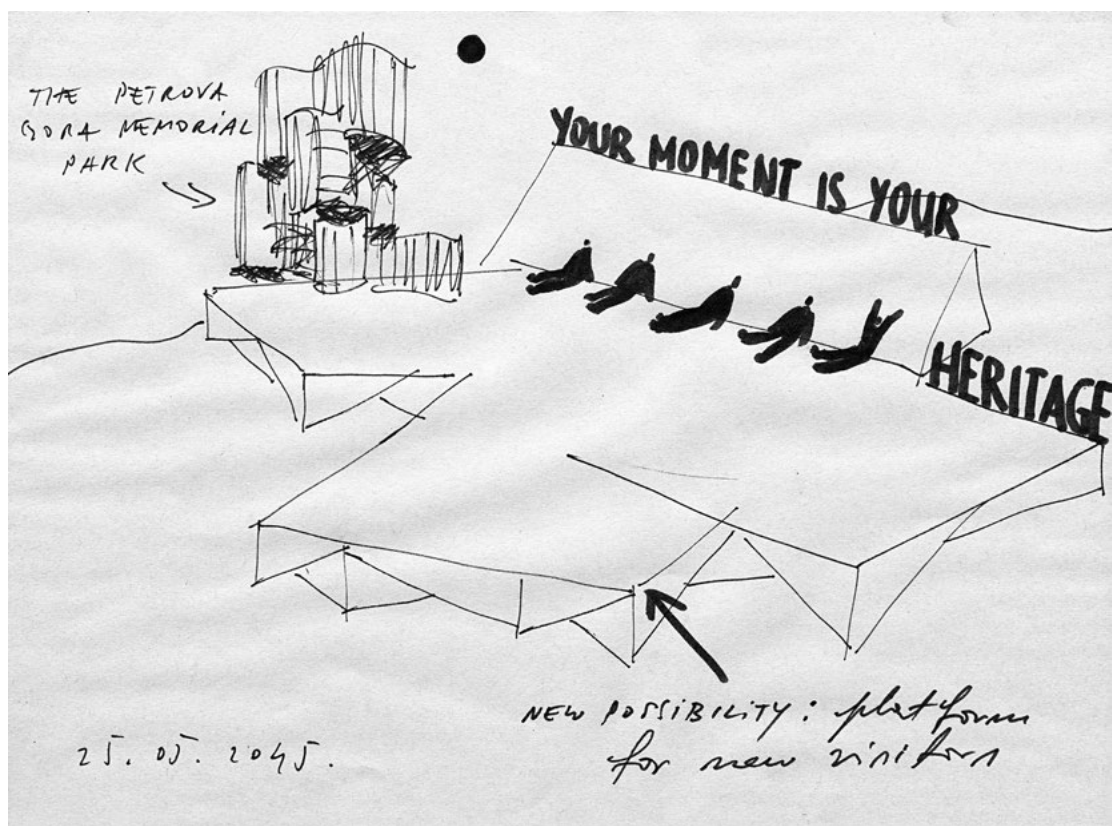
**WHW:** Is the history of modernism being taught in an appropriate way, at the Academy [of Fine Arts, Zagreb] for example, and what does this mean for young artists?

**DM:** While I studied at the Academy, not only Bakić but the majority of important artists—and not only the ones connected with modernism but also the ones connected with conceptual art—were completely invisible, did not exist as an integral part of the curriculum. Not a small number of students leave the Academy of Fine Arts without having heard even once of Mangelos, for example. Moreover, this is considered normal; these artists are not in the curriculum, and if a student does not have some personal interest, a number of artists will escape his or her attention. It is the same with the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, with [Jo] Klek, [Ljubomir] Micić . . . and many others. I suppose that modernism is being treated more systematically in the art history department, especially postwar modernism, but it is not included at the Academy of Fine Arts. If Bakić is mentioned at all, it is because of his *Bull* or some other semi-abstract sculpture, but that would be the end of it. On the whole, very superficial [...]

**WHW:** Do you think that this is a consequence of the ideological treatment of socialist modernism?

**DM:** I am speaking above all about some general lethargy, but of course many things changed during the 1990s, and Bakić lost the position that he had held. Today he is completely invisible as a sculptor, his atelier is totally neglected, his sculptures in the open are decaying, and the state's treatment towards such an artist is completely inappropriate. In addition, if we are talking about contemporary sculpture, we must acknowledge Bakić, since he is one of the most serious sculptors of that era and simply cannot be ignored. However, here it always happens that some historical aspects suddenly become invisible and that on some levels history loses continuity.

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David Maljković. *Scene for a New Heritage – New Possibilities Series, A*, 2004. Felt-tip pen on paper, 9¾ × 12¾" (24.8 × 32.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty-First Century



# Three Takes on the Environment: Redefinitions of the City; On the Intersections of Design and Art in Tallinn in the 1970s

ANDRES KURG

“Environment” may be among the key terms for representing the convergence of technology, design and art in the 1970s. It was heralded by designers and architects who saw their role as not merely adding discrete objects to the environment but as designing the environment as a totality. Similarly, “environment” was invoked in art criticism and commentary as a progressive subject in painting; it featured prominently in cybernetic and semiotic theories, to include information flow and provide feedback; and towards the end of the decade it was frequently a subject of discussions on ecology, the contamination of nature and the necessity of its protection.

In the Soviet Union from the 1960s onwards, the relationship between design and environment came to be seen in the context of economic and societal modernization, and in light of the progress in living standards that it supposedly brought about. To achieve such modernization, industrial production was restructured to support increased automation and the growth of an artificial, man-made environment. These new forces were also subjected to analysis by new scientific methods and disciplines such as cybernetics, ergonomics and linguistics. Thus, investigation into new technologies and their role in everyday life formed part of the reality of the designer.

One of the important changes that occurred in Soviet design discourse during the second half of the 1960s was a shift from separate objects to systems related to environment: as the head of the Department of Industrial Art at Estonian State Art Institute Bruno Tomberg put it, “It became clear that an object does not exist separately in reality and that design is a phenomenon of the synthesis of material culture—the social, ideological, cultural and other influences have always been integrated into art.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than emphasizing form-making as the traditional field of design, the

new definition saw it in conjunction with economic control, optimization of choice, and control of quality and consumption.

According to Tomberg, design would find its role among other art disciplines, and it would produce a new territory—the environment itself:

*The architect designs buildings, the garden architect designs parks, the advertising artist is responsible for advertisements, but who looks after the streets, traffic signs, children’s playgrounds and dustbins? [...] All of this should be the work of designers; they should be interested in the city in its entirety. [...] The main problem for the industrial arts is the design and planning of a suitable and decent living environment for humans.*<sup>2</sup>

This reconceptualized design practice concerned not only its domain but also how designers were meant to approach it: acting more like inventors, viewing the needs of the society from a more holistic or synthetic perspective.

This kind of all-encompassing design of the living environment was also seen as differentiating Soviet design from capitalist design. If the latter was seen as reifying society, these texts prescribe the task of humanizing society for Soviet designers. Given the context of new technologies and the new growth of synthetic arts and “aesthetics” of the milieu, the described role acted, among other things, to counter popular concerns about the replacement of humans with computers, and was intended to mediate the consequences of technological civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Soviet design also differentiated itself from Western design with regard to the latter’s orientation toward increasing consumer demand

2 — Jaak Olep. “Pilguga tulevikku. Vastab ERKI disainikateedri Juhataja dotsent Bruno Tomberg.” *Sirp ja Vasar*, 4 August 1972.

1 — Bruno Tomberg. *Jooni disaini arengust*. Manuscript in Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design. Tallinn, 1979, pp. 5–6.

3 — Rudolf Sarap. *Teaduse ja tehnika revolutsioon ja esteetika*. Tallinn: Kunst, 1975, p. 12.

and the production of surplus value. If, according to critical theorists, the work of Western designers during the 1960s could be described as that of adding value to consumer items in the form of symbols and prestige,<sup>4</sup> then in contrast, in a socialist society oriented towards eradicating the differences between social classes, design should not have functioned as a marker of status.

Theorists writing on technical aesthetics thus turned to the role of aesthetic value, but also, relying on theoretical discussions as exemplified by leftist critics in the West like Tomás Maldonado, to the informational value that was to prove predominant over usage value. In the abovementioned article, Tomberg describes how the work of the designer begins with the problem of the excess of information encountered in an urban environment and its organization.<sup>5</sup> The aim of design was to translate rapid changes in culture and technology to the users and adapt these to everyday life, encompassing not only the aesthetic sphere but also the social sphere. Thus, surplus value was recoded as “cultural information” that design was intended to mediate. Similarly, distinct from usage value, it defined the superstructural face of an era and communicated it to the users via formal means.

Starting from these discussions in the Soviet design profession, I want to take a look at the approach to the environment of three artists working in Tallinn in the late 1960s and 1970s—Leonhard Lapin, Sirje Runge and Jüri Okas—whose practices spanned the fields of design and architecture and explored this new role of design in modeling the urban realm. They had all studied at the Estonian State Art Institute during the first half of the 1970s, were part of a close-knit group of friends and often took walks in the city together to explore the neglected and peripheral urban terrains. During these walks, the urban, industrial and technological transformations were explored in combination with the irrational and disruptive qualities that surfaced in everyday situations. Looking at their intertwined yet different approaches, I will examine how environment was interpreted in the practices of these designers and artists, emerging as an alternative to the dominant ideas in art and producing potential answers to the reorganizations in the production systems as well as the social changes of the period.

### Recuperating a Forgotten Environment

The first example is that of Leonhard Lapin, who studied architecture at the State Art Institute from 1968 to 1971 and after graduation was employed in the State Directorate for Restoration till 1974. One of his major works there was an analysis of the built environment of Tallinn's central areas, “An Overview of the Visual Milieu of Tallinn and Its Importance in the Reconstruction of the Central City” (1974).<sup>6</sup> The work consisted of photographic documentation and description of architecture and the built environment of the areas surrounding the old city, with the aim of extrapolating different areas with different stylistic details or character. Furthermore, this was supposed to be a basis for determining the landmark value of the areas, which had to be taken into account in future planning and architectural interventions. Thus, Lapin identified which of the areas and architectural groupings were worth saving for the future, and which ones did not really offer any architectural value. In its focus on nontraditional landmarks—peripheral areas, industrial zones, working-class suburbs with wooden tenement houses from the turn of the century—it [charted the rise of modernity from the end of the] 19th century to the early 20th century. Furthermore, the beginning of the 20th century was seen to contain a potential that was perverted in the postwar era through “soulless” industrialization of building production and commercial interests.<sup>7</sup>

In the accompanying text to the project, Lapin demonstrated a desire for architects' control over and clear management of the environment: he lamented about neglected verdure, the courtyard structures that evolved without the participation of the architect, the chaotic planning of the harbor area. “It lacks the systemic regulation of functions needed for an efficiently functioning harbor, nor is there an architecturally legible transfer from the sea to the city,” writes Lapin.<sup>8</sup> If this call to abolish holes, irregularities, and spontaneous additions could be seen as similar to attempts to unify the city under a master plan, a general approach to urban planning in the dominant modernism of the period, then Lapin's standpoint still differed from the socialist modernist

6 — Estonian State Archives (ERA), f. T-76, n. 1, s. 1994.

7 — See also: Leonhard Lapin. *Avangard. Tartu Ülikooli filosoofiateaduskonna vabade kunstide professori Leonhard Lapini loengud 2001. Aastal. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus*, 2003, p. 113.

8 — ERA: f. T-76, n. 1, s. 1994, 16–8.

4 — The commentators included Roland Barthes, Henri Lefebvre and Jean Baudrillard, among others.

5 — Tomberg, *Jooni disaini arengust*, p. 37.

desire to subject the environment to a single regulating principle. He demonstrated that the architectural face of the city consisted of many layers, periods and qualities and clearly celebrated the architectural plurality that had been neglected in official histories, seeing his work as a way to bring that plurality back into official representations and public consciousness. This plurality, however, was seen from a top-down professional perspective, and it was the architect who should have overseen the changes and processes in the city.

On the basis of research done in the directorate, Lapin published a series of articles during the autumn of 1974 on the “architectural image” of Tallinn in the cultural newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*.<sup>9</sup> His classification followed a traditional style history, labeling early-20th-century buildings as historicism, neo-gothic, art nouveau, etc. Behind this apparently neutral, depoliticizing art-historical categorization occasionally stood an argument for the prioritizing of local materials and detailing in contrast to anonymous neoclassical “types” imposed on Tallinn architecture by St. Petersburg and Moscow during the Russian Empire period. “One should emphasize the good building quality of the historicist architecture of Tallinn, its rich detailing and the relationship of the structures to the surrounding nature or verdure, compared to which the 19th-century military neoclassicism looks dry and boring.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, then, the value of the built environment was in correlation with its correspondence to representing locality and national identity rather than preconceived types. Furthermore, this polarization refers to the similar situation in Estonia during the time Lapin is writing in the 1970s, where the built environment was dominated by standardized system-built housing subject to centrally fixed norms and regulations. The critique of mass housing, its anonymity and homogeneity, rising from the late 1960s onwards, often went hand in hand with the emerging interest in national identity, which prompted a look back to the independence period of the 1920s and ’30s, and especially to the early modernist buildings.

More recently, Lapin has written on the role of functionalism as the first national movement in Estonian architecture that developed its specific language and “a unique connection

to local building tradition,” carrying “a heroic idea of independence, of being a new member of Europe—when one looked not to the East but to the West.”<sup>11</sup> Thus a similar argument that Lapin presented in the early 1970s through a style history he later translates to political history, with modern architecture interpreted as a symbol of independence and freedom.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting from the point of the current argument, however, that Lapin himself also proposed several improvements for the city in his work. He emphasized the need for a “different kind of monumental art practice in the contemporary world.”<sup>13</sup> Thus the visual milieu should be designed by combining architecture, art and synthetic design that uses up-to-date means of production and information: “As the urban environment is a place for the concentration, multiplication and dissemination of information in contemporary society, its development should be seen in relation to art and aesthetics.”<sup>14</sup>

From there he went on to propose a strategy for “artistic coloring of the wooden dwellings,” an idea which in fact was proposed by Lapin’s friends Vilen Künnapu and Juhan Viiding in the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar* in 1972 “to supplement wooden structures that would not be demolished for another 20 or 30 years [...] with vibrant colours and to use the blank walls of industrial structures as exhibition spaces by [filling] them with posters and images.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Lapin also proposed so-called transformative structures to be used in the empty spots in the city that would combine “communicative functions,” including “information booths, commerce, service and cultural institutions.”<sup>16</sup>

If within the framework of Lapin’s study these examples remained somewhat abstract and ungrounded, they in fact resurfaced in a much more concrete form a year later, in the diploma project by Sirje Runge, who was Lapin’s then-wife with whom Lapin collaborated closely.

11 — Lapin. *Avangard*, p. 106.

12 — Ibid., p. 107. In another chapter in the book he writes that architects of the Tallinn school “turned to functionalism as a style of building that symbolised independence, taking their examples from the white houses of the 1930s. Functionalism architecture was for us a symbol of the golden Estonian independence period and this desire was initially of emotional value, later joined by purely professional aspirations, like getting to know the architectural history of the whole world.” See p. 132.

13 — ERA: f. T-76, n. 1, s. 1994, 16–8.

14 — Ibid.

15 — Vilen Künnapu, Juhan Viiding. “Ettepanek.” *Sirp ja Vasar*, 1 September 1972.

16 — ERA: f. T-76, n. 1, s. 1994, 16–8.

9 — Leonhard Lapin. “Tallinna ehituskunstilisest ilmest.” *Sirp ja Vasar*, 1 November 1974.

10 — Ibid.

### Between Informational and Irrational

Runge's diploma project at the Department of Industrial Art of the Estonian State Art Institute, "Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn" (1975), displayed proposals for artistic interventions at selected sites in the city. She proposed three different types of intervention as urban decoration—repainting neglected courtyards, adding modular compositional structures to empty spaces in the city, and "urban design fantasies," which each explore the atmospheric qualities of the environment and aspire to embrace the human senses.<sup>17</sup> The sites for the interventions were often (former) industrial areas, peripheral sites in relation to dominant representations of the city, including several sites that Lapin had photographed and documented in his work for the Directorate for Restoration a year earlier.

The project consisted of eleven display boards and eighty color slides, the latter representing abstract fragments from the display boards. Runge commented on the unusual form of the project, explaining that she wished to produce an "independent aesthetic whole" on every display board that would develop beyond the usual technical drawings of designers and explore the new means of expression.<sup>18</sup>

In an extended theoretical statement, Runge explained that her aim was to overcome the monotonous modernization of the city by taking into account the various systems of communication that make up the urban environment and utilizing them in the design process, thereby making it appropriable by the masses: "One should once again raise the aim of bringing art to the streets, by giving it volume and content proper to urban design."<sup>19</sup> Although Runge's approach to urban space was primarily an aesthetic one, her understanding was not limited to the discipline's traditional domain and, similarly to Lapin, she saw the urban environment as also including the concentration and reproduction of information.

Including information within the domain of aesthetics implied not only the redefinition of art but also of how information was to be understood. In 1972, commenting on the need for an essentially different architecture for contemporary theatre practice, Runge and Lapin wrote (referring to Marshall McLuhan)

that the new cybernetic era had brought along not only new machines and materials but also "new images, means and knowledge," and had replaced the era of linear information with that of cybernetic information.<sup>20</sup> As examples of these new means of information they listed the telephone, television, film, space technology, photography and light bulbs.

They called upon artists to explore the imaginative atmospheric and synaesthetic potential embedded in new technology, as the new cybernetic era had not only conceived new machines and materials but also new images, means and knowledge:

*The new era employs sensorial, engineering, kinetic, sonic and verbal means as information, to embrace all human senses and the central nervous system. The invasion of new means of information to everyday and cultural life is illustrated by the triumph of television, [...] kinetics in visual arts, happenings in theatre and concert.*<sup>21</sup>

The potential of the formal means of new media, which could produce an environment with a new kind of involvement, was a central feature in Runge's diploma project. Modular structures at selected empty spots in the centre were the closest match to the described comprehensive informational environment—cubes and spheres that functioned as information centers, with screens and advertisements, and which could also provide space for small shops and for the "intercommunication" of city dwellers. In Runge's description, the structures conceal their playful potential: they have light and sound effects, and there is potential for climbing into and around the structures or spending time inside a personalized music center.

This playful attitude was carried into the third part of the work, the "urban fantasies," in which Runge proposed to add "symbolic chimneys" to a power station by the sea, and to deliver harmless, colorful and pleasant-smelling fumes.<sup>22</sup> Between the chimneys there was to be a labyrinthine park. These fantasies also revealed another aspect of Runge's understanding of the urban environment, something she called non-rational and chaotic, and which was present in the multilayered and "subjective"

17 — Sirje Lapin. *Tallinna kesklinna miljöö kujundamise võimalusi*. Diploma work at the Estonian State Art Institute, Department of Industrial Design. Tallinn, 1975, p. 19.

18 — Ibid., p. 5.

19 — Ibid., p. 35.

20 — Sirje Lapin, Leonhard Lapin. "On Sūgis, lehed langevad." In *Thespis. Meie teatriuudendused 1972/73*. Ed. V. Vahing. Tartu: Ilmamaa, 1997, p. 289.

21 — Ibid., p. 290.

22 — Sirje Lapin. *Tallinna kesklinna miljöö kujundamise võimalusi*, p. 11.

nature of the city's various structures despite its functional organization. Thus, her work demonstrated an ambiguity in terms of its attitude to the environment: on the one hand she proposed a universal modular system that in different combinations could be applied to all empty locations in the city and whereby the user was immersed in the formal play of different atmospheric media, cutting him or her off from the specific nature of the site;<sup>23</sup> but on the other hand she emphasized the difference between individual urban locations and used her work to explore the "irrational and subjective" qualities of particular places.

Similarly, Runge's work has an ambivalent character in respect to the role of art. By proposing the provision of space for advertising and for communication as play, by calling for the exploration of the modular structures and displaying different information through artistic practices, the work envisions an involvement by the enlarged means of art. Abstract compositional patterns and vibrant color were used to negotiate between the informational and irrational, uncovering the neglected environment for a new kind of use. In contrast to Lapin's project, which was presented in the context of the discussions on heritage, Runge's work is also decidedly temporary, driven by the particular qualities of different places in the city, by rediscovering the neglected and marginal locations, recognizing their otherness in terms of the dominant urbanism and opening them up for potential public uses that rethink their character.

### Questioning Architecture

Similar postindustrial terrain occupies a central space in the works of architect and artist Jüri Okas. Okas was a few years younger than Lapin and was a close associate of his during his studies at the art institute. From the very beginning of the 1970s, he began to take photographs of the urban environment, being especially fascinated by the everyday and utilitarian architectural objects that generally tend to escape one's attention—by the urban wastelands, neglected courtyards and facades of houses. Thus, engaging very much in the same territories as Lapin's aforementioned work, he was nevertheless fascinated by what Lapin would have considered superfluous, disturbing and excessive to the architectural order.

Several of Okas's photographs were later used by him in montage images from 1974, which in turn became a basis for his print series called *Reconstructions*. In these images, the environments and arrangements were overlaid with black squares and lines that formed constructive structures upon the depicted image, as if modifying the real situation, but the lines often also converged at a certain point of the picture (in most cases in the center) to form a single-point perspective grid upon the photo. The pictures often represented fragmented space and illogical perspective constructs, "cutting up the space, moving its elements around, thus producing new illusory spaces, intertwining the space in every which way and creating new perspectives and symbols using graphic elements," as one critic put it.<sup>24</sup>

The *Reconstructions* were exhibited in the Tallinn Art Hall's third-floor gallery in 1976, in Okas's solo show titled *Reconstruction. Idea. Project.*, where in addition to photographs and prints, one part of the gallery space also included an installation that made an attempt to transform the reconstruction into three dimensions. Among other things, the installation made an attempt to rearrange the traditional viewing situation and to engage the public in a different way, thus encompassing her or him within an *environment*. It is indeed with this latter term, with reference to Allan Kaprow, that Okas's installation and his amateur film based on that exhibition was retrospectively titled.

Okas's own comments on his works have mostly remained on a highly abstract level. He has frequently mentioned his interest in structures of "order and chaos" or "seeing and noticing the essential."<sup>25</sup> In one interview from the early 1990s, he elaborated on the balance between construction and destruction in his works: "If you have a certain structure or a model then you have to start taking parts away from it. At one point, the construction either collapses or will be suspended at some kind of indeterminate level," revealing his fascination with the boundary situation and formlessness.<sup>26</sup> And in many ways this is characteristic of his take on the environment: it is not clear what direction the environment is moving in; moreover, it is not clear what the artist's role

24 — Vilen Künnapu. "Jüri Okase keskkonnakunst." *Sirp ja Vasar*, 26 March 1976.

25 — Jüri Okas. *The Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture: Photographs 1974–1986*. Tallinn: Jüri Okas, 1995.

26 — Kärt Hellerma. "Jüri Okast ei huvita inimene, vaid keskkond." *Hommikuleht*, 29 May 1993.

23 — It does not mean, however, that the differences among various users are not considered. Runge's intention was to let individual visitors choose what was relevant to them.



Sirje Runge. "Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn: Re-Colouring of the Courtyards." 1975.  
Courtesy the artist and the Museum of Estonian Architecture



is in this. Instead of a clear political or technological affiliation, there is a revolving door—of entropy and order, information and noise, fragmentation and continuity.

This becomes explicit in a short text written in 1980 for the Estonian architectural review to introduce his project from 1977, a petrol station for the Paide KEK construction company. Formally, the petrol station included a free-standing wall that separated the building from a busy highway; one end of it was stepping down in the mode of a “ruin,” and the name of Paide KEK was written on the wall, a motif borrowed from American postmodern architecture, especially the theories of Robert Venturi. The black color of the huge letters was meant to contrast with the red base of the building, but due to the bad quality of the color, the supremacist scheme was carried out in pink. Instead of this stylistic or technical context, Okas described the building in its surrounding or spatial situation, that of the Tallinn–Tartu road, and just listed objects and structures seen on the roadsides in a laconic way, without any hierarchical separation:

*At the roadside are: buildings that are completed, buildings that are under completion, decaying buildings, piles of gravel, piles of building panels, [...] heaps of snow, [...] heaps of hay, transformers, chimneys, [...] telephone posts, kilometre posts, drains, ploughed fields, unploughed fields, hills, pastures [...] From 1977–1980, another object was put up on the side of the Tallinn–Tartu road, i.e., a six metre high “decaying” wall. On the wall is written Paide KEK and behind it is the petrol station of the Paide KEK.<sup>27</sup>*

This text appears striking as instead of an architectural order that one is supposed to engage in as an architect, it offers a recognition of the entropic condition of architecture that adds “just one more object” to the roadside. However, at the same time, the building itself attempts to mix different layers and elements, following Venturi’s notions of complexity and contradiction, among other things to resemble decay or blend into this environment. The architectural features are then something deriving from “disorder” rather than imposing their own preconceived order.

If Lapin’s text about urban environment celebrated multiplicity in a form of “high”

architecture where the architect is the one who maintains control over it, then Okas seemed to recognize the self-generating role of environments that escapes the control of the architect. In this case, there is no possibility to fix value in the environment: as in Lapin’s work, the environment rather emerges as a result of industrial excess, displaying objects the usefulness of which is put under question. Equally, Okas’s installation in the Tallinn Art Hall functioned as a noisy environment, where the stability of the viewer relationship was undone by the lack of a single correct point for contemplation and an encouragement of constant movement in space, allowing no fixity of the subject.

### The End of Environment?

The interest in the environment of these artists was in many ways an answer to the point in postwar modernization where its effects started to be perceived as homogenizing and inflexible rather than liberating, where the housing blocks and new infrastructure, which a decade ago had embodied a promise of a better future, came to be seen as imprisoning. Against this background, there emerged demands for diversity, for new kinds of freedom, for mobility and individuality. These demands took many forms, from direct political activities and dissident movement to a withdrawal to the “private” sphere, to emerging subculture movements or engagement in the “second” economy of illegal trade in the black market. In the art context, this has often been described as building an “unofficial” art scene, located in artists’ studios and homes, improvised galleries in the foyers of science institutions, or student cultural centers.

However, for these three artists from Tallinn the answer lay not so much in a withdrawal as in an attempt to investigate and redefine the environment using the means at their disposal. For Lapin this was represented in the rediscovery of architectural history, looking at the forgotten or excluded styles and periods, as well as relating that history to the then-repressed national history. Runge’s interventions started from a decorative position, as proposals to beautify the city with unexpected color compositions; however, she saw in this a way to activate the viewer and to offer the user interactive means for urban enjoyment. Furthermore, chimneys producing colorful and aromatic fumes could be seen as a way in which the outdated technologies of industrial production could be re-deployed for new uses. Okas’s representations of the everyday and infrastructural as part of

27 — Jüri Okas. “Bensiinijaam Mäol.” *Ehituskunst*, 1981, no. 1, p. 34.

the architectural environment contextualized the fixity of meanings in an urban context and led to the redefinition of the relationship between architecture and the environment. In many ways, several of these strategies and positions were similar to the so-called post-modernism in the West, manifesting the contradictions of modernization: the restructuring of production, transformation in technology and ways of engaging labor, and producing the criticism of modernist mass society and a call for new liberties.

The upsurge of environment in the 1970s in the West was equally seen as a break with previous modes of social reference and productive forces as well as a response to the fragmentation of nature. In a text from 1972, "Design and Environment, or How Political Economy Escalates into Cyberblitz," Jean Baudrillard saw the new kind of environment emerge through a total semantic process or the dominance of the sign value in all aspects of society. With this shift, the environment becomes a branch of mass communication, a network of messages and signs, subjected to the laws—or to the tyranny—of communication. For Baudrillard, this was the story of growing societal control where the practice of design, hand in hand with new cybernetic technologies, was playing a leading role, imposing "sign exchange value at all levels of models and operational practices," thus becoming a total design.<sup>28</sup> "In fact, if one speaks of environment, it is because it has already ceased to exist," the process of control through design has led to total abstraction and the death of nature.<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, it would be easy to dismiss the discussed artistic interventions as simply furthering the process of total semantics and control: indeed it was kinetic art, "lumino-dynamic manipulation,"<sup>30</sup> not unlike the structures by Runge, towards which Baudrillard did not hide his contempt and denounced as being on the way toward becoming total design.

Yet if modernization had driven the environment in the Soviet Union to a similar point as in the West, its answer to it lay not in restructuring the mode of production, not speaking about the political structures, but in

continuing the disciplinary modernization that now was radically out of sync with the demands of its subjects. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have put it: "The heavy bureaucracy of the Soviet state, inherited from a long period of intense modernization, placed Soviet power in an impossible position when it had to react to the new demands and desires that globally emerging subjectivities expressed, first within the process of modernization and then at its outer limits."<sup>31</sup> According to them, it was in the realm of the subject that the Cold War power conflicts between East and West were most intensely enacted, as the Soviet inability to recognize the subject's transformation led to rapidly decreasing labor productivity and economic stagnation; whereas in the West, this new kind of subject, relayed to the new communication and cybernetic technologies, was included in its entirety in the reorganized production process in which it played a key role—a process leading to immaterial production and informatization of production.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, indeed, what for Baudrillard in this process had signified a path towards total design and control, emerged in the Soviet context as an alternative, a way to explore new identities and relationships vis-à-vis the transformed environment. In regarding the environment as an informational realm and studying its possibilities for reengaging the viewer, it also became, in contrast to the withdrawal into the private sphere, a positive moment in addressing the needs of the emerging subjectivity and its demands.

From today's viewpoint, studying these complex interactions and simultaneous and often contradictory tactics of artists, it helps to uncover the hidden differences and variations from later developments and dominant interpretations. Thus, it points to a prehistory of future transformations, containing alternative routes and omitted trajectories.

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28 — Jean Baudrillard. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Candor, NY: Telos Press, 1981, p. 201.

29 — Ibid., p. 202.

30 — Ibid., p. 195.

31 — Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 277.

32 — Ibid., pp. 277–278.

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**Exhibiting  
the “East”  
since 1989**



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# Introduction

CLAIRE BISHOP

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**This chapter assembles key writing on Eastern European exhibition history since** the ideological transition of 1989 to 1991—although, as we will see, the curatorial optic through which this geographical region is perceived is far from stable and changes rapidly in tandem with geopolitical dynamics. In the broadest brushstrokes, we could chart the path of “Eastern Europe” in art exhibitions since 1989 as follows: from an attempt to identify and recover the art of the former East “newly discovered” by Western curators after the raising of the Iron Curtain, to a focus on “Central and Eastern Europe” as a nostalgic recovery of the Austro-Hungarian empire, to a preoccupation with “the Balkans” in the wake of the Yugoslav wars, to a tentative dialogue with post-Soviet Russia and Central Asia, to the “New Europe” as it confronts its non-EU (i.e., non-Christian) limits. Although the period since 1989 has also been marked by the rise of exhibitions focusing on the contemporary art of specific nations (particularly Poland and the Czech Republic), this introduction will focus on international survey shows of contemporary art from the region as a whole, rather than national exhibitions, national contributions to biennials, or monographic shows.<sup>1</sup>

Alongside this trajectory of large-scale survey exhibitions, most of which have taken place in Western Europe and North America, it is also crucial to consider Eastern Europe’s self-historicization, primarily on the part of the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, but also undertaken by smaller entities such as the tranzit.org network, the curatorial collective What, How & for Whom (WHW), and the Foksal Gallery Foundation. These institutions and organizations have collected, archived, exhibited, and published research into the avant-gardes of the 1960s through the 1980s, including foundational work on individual artists and collectives (Jiří Kovanda, NSK, Oskar Hansen) whose impact has extended beyond art-historical circles to a broader public. It is no coincidence that these projects have been more complex and less idealizing than the exhibitions made outside of the region.

The first phase of Eastern European group shows post-1989 was in the register of curatorial safari: American curators went hunting for discoveries in the newly open territory and brought these artworks back as trophies. *Artists of Central and Eastern Europe* (Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, 1995) and *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1995) were both modest shows presenting artists from Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, and deliberately excluded the former Yugoslavia because of the war ensuing from the country’s disintegration. The foreword to the catalogue for *Beyond Belief* reveals a fascination with Eastern Europe’s experience of a different ideological system, one that “to the West is mysterious and rarely characterized.”<sup>2</sup> In what will become a near universal trope for Western surveys of Eastern European art in the following decade, the catalogue includes a map of the region, and a fourteen-page timeline of events

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1 — Neither will this essay refer to medium-specific exhibitions, such as the video show *New Europe, New Video: A Survey of Eastern European Video* (Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2004).

2 — Director’s foreword, *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1995), vi.



there, culminating with the opening of the first McDonald's in Romania in 1995. Maps with facts and statistics about each country indicate that, for American audiences at least, this part of the world was new and uncharted territory.

Celebrating the tenth anniversary of 1989, *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1999) changed the game by upping the intellectual stakes. An ambitious, cross-disciplinary research project by Serbian art historian Bojana Pejić, *After the Wall* aimed to leapfrog the issue of national representation by creating a new conceptual matrix: the postcommunist condition. Its two-volume catalogue assembled a critical mass of artists from Estonia to Armenia and writers who contributed thematic essays (rather than national surveys) on topics as varied as ethnicity and multiculturalism, post-politics, gender and identity, internet art, and self-colonization. *After the Wall* is one of the few surveys of Eastern European art to have well represented the Baltic states, which otherwise tended to be overlooked in favor of Central Europe and the Balkans. In part this was due to the changing priorities of certain national funding bodies, as a result of economic realignments between Western and Eastern European countries after 1989: the Baltic states became the object of German and Scandinavian economic expansion and were subsumed through rapid assimilation into a newly hip and thriving "Nordic art scene."<sup>3</sup> The other gravitational hub for cultural funding was (and remains) Austria, which set its sights on Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans in a similar attempt to consolidate economic hegemony. This ambition is reflected in *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe, 1949–1999* (Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, 1999), curated by Lóránd Hegyi, which offered a romanticized attempt to overcome the historical differences between Western and Eastern Europe. Hegyi worked in collaboration with a slew of international curators, who each contributed an essay on his or her own national history; Hegyi's own text proposes the existence of a sensibility and cultural awareness that is uniquely Central European (a construct later criticized by art historian Piotr Piotrowski as one of Western domination over the East).<sup>4</sup>

As Raluca Voinea has noted, all of these 1990s exhibitions were preoccupied with the concept of Eastern Europe as the legacy of the Yalta agreement in 1945, and attempted to position the art of this region as the lost half of a shared European culture, speaking the same language as Western contemporary art.<sup>5</sup> After 2000, the focus for such exhibitions would change tack. Two directions evolved. The first was a focus on the Balkans, an object of fascination (and some exoticization) due to the devastating ethnic conflicts between Bosnia and Serbia in the 1990s and to the area's position at the interface of West and East, Christian and Muslim, and the former Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. It is telling that most of these exhibitions of Balkan art were

3 — Exemplary here is the revitalization of the Baltic Young Artists' Triennial by the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius after 1992. Renamed the Baltic Triennial of International Art, the 1997 edition, *Cool Places*, featured works by Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian artists alongside artists from Poland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden. See Lolita Jablonskienė, "All at Sea Together: The Baltic Art Scene of the 1990s," in *Nineties: Contemporary Art in Latvia*, ed. I. Astakhovska (Riga: Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2010), 191–99.

4 — According to Hegyi, the Central European sensibility is characterized by, among other things, "a permanent crisis of identity," a "self-tormenting, masochistic attitude," and a

preoccupation with ethnicity rather than a rational analysis of social class. Lóránd Hegyi, "Central Europe as a Hypothesis and a Way of Life," in *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe, 1949–1999* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 1999), 10–11. Piotrowski's critique can be found in his "Central Europe in the Face of Unification," in *Who if Not We Should at Least Try and Imagine the Future of All This? Seven episodes on (ex)changing Europe*, ed. Maria Hlavajova (Amsterdam: Artimo, 2004), 271–81.

5 — Raluca Voinea, "Geographically Defined Exhibitions: The Balkans, Between Eastern Europe and the New Europe," *Third Text* 21, no. 2 (March 2007). Reprinted in this volume.

produced in Austria and Germany, which sought to extend its influence south as well as north. The second direction, largely spearheaded by the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, was to undertake a historical examination of Eastern European art from an Eastern European perspective, and thereby to spur the creation of new institutions and collecting practices. As the Balkan shows are discussed by Voinea later in this chapter, I will focus on the latter.

Under the directorship of Zdenka Badovinac, the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana mounted the first historical exhibitions of Eastern European art to be organized within the region itself. The landmark show *Body and the East* (1998) offered a survey of performance and body art in Eastern Europe from the 1960s to the present, while *Arteast 2000+* (2000) marked the formation of a public collection of Eastern European art in dialogue with the West. Many of the works were donated to the collection by artists, keen to keep local art in the milieu of its production rather than being exported to private collections in neighboring Austria, whose Erste Foundation (a subsidiary of the country's largest savings bank) has funded many exhibitions of Eastern European art, most significantly *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Due to long-standing friendships between Slovenian and Russian artists as a result of collaborations in the early 1990s, Slovenia was the first Eastern European country to broach the fraught relationship between this region and Russia.<sup>7</sup> An analysis of this relationship was perhaps only possible in the former Yugoslavia, due to the country's geographic and ideological distance from Moscow, from whose influence it split in 1948. *Seven Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow* (Moderna Galerija, 2004) sought to identify the seven deadly sins “typical of the Eastern European, and particularly the Slavic, soul”: Collectivism, Utopianism, Masochism, Cynicism, Laziness, Unprofessionalism, and Love of the West. This tongue-in-cheek structure was also an exercise in *samokritika* (the Soviet ritual of self-criticism), and the curators pointedly rebranded these “sins” (in Western eyes) as “virtues” from an Eastern perspective.<sup>8</sup>

As *Seven Sins* anticipated, the most striking development in the 2000s was to integrate Russian and, eventually, Central Asian art alongside the art of Eastern Europe, acknowledging the existence of a post-Soviet condition.<sup>9</sup> This orientation was also a recognition of the *differences* between Eastern and Western European art—a much-needed corrective after a decade and a half of disavowing divergent postwar histories in the rush to integrate with the European Union and to identify as Western. The research and exhibitions of WHW have been paradigmatic in this regard: the collective's Istanbul Biennial of 2009 focused on the parallels between artistic and political developments in

6 — *Gender Check* brought a long overdue feminist approach to the art of Eastern Europe since the 1960s, dismantling the myth of gender equality under communism and addressing the changing status of individualism and collectivism. It was the first major exhibition to be independently initiated and launched by Erste Foundation, funded by Erste Bank's operations in Central and Southeastern Europe. The foundation has also funded the tranzit network since its inception in 2002, which now has outposts in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

7 — The key event in this regard was IRWIN's *NSK Embassy Moscow* in 1992. See the dialogues transcribed in Eda Čufer, ed., *How the East Sees the East: NSK Embassy Moscow* (Koper: Loža Gallery, 1992).

8 — “Utopianism, for instance, may serve as an antidote to pragmatism, stressing hope and future perspectives; laziness gives artists time to concentrate on their own development and the questions that obsess them; since Eastern artists are in many cases not true ‘professionals,’ they are able to really love what they do; and so on.” Zdenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel, “Seven Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow,” in *Seven Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2008), 8.

9 — Tellingly, however, it was not until 2015 that the reverse took place—i.e., that Eastern European art was shown in Russia—when Ljubljana's *Arteast 2000+* collection was loaned to the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow.

Eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. On a smaller scale, Boris Groys's *Privatisations: Contemporary Art from Eastern Europe* (KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2004) also included work from Russia and Central Asia (Tajikistan and Kazakhstan); the exhibition catalogue, with red letters peeping through a cut-out gold cover, emblemizes the new capitalization of subjects and nations that were until recently communist. Groys argues that Eastern European artists extend the paradise of "actually existing socialism" by choosing to present the world as quasi-utopian and idyllic.<sup>10</sup> Artists more usually seen as bleak and critical (e.g., Artur Żmijewski) are thus reframed as utopians, privately appropriating the symbolic world of socialism. This typically ironic and counterintuitive maneuver by Groys is a further reminder of the enduring differences between Eastern and Western European intellectuals, at least among the generation educated prior to 1989.

With the EU integration of the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Poland in 2004, followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the imaginary construct of "Eastern Europe" increasingly tended to be replaced in exhibitions by the concept of "the New Europe." *Arrivals: Art from the New Europe* (Modern Art Oxford, 2005–07) comprised an intermittent program of work by artists from the newest members of the EU, as well as Cyprus and Malta. In a more critical vein, *The New Europe: Culture of Mixing and Politics of Representation* (Generali Foundation, Vienna, 2005) presented the work of ten artists/collectives as expressions of cultural dissent and contradiction that "overcome the old East-West distinction and formulate a new culture of mixing."<sup>11</sup> Five years later, *Project Europa: Imagining the (Im)possible* (Harn Museum of Art, Florida) presented a darker vision of Fortress Europe as it experienced the stresses of immigration, especially from neighboring Islamic countries.<sup>12</sup>

The incursion of postcolonial theory into Eastern European self-understanding has been belated and was perhaps best marked by *Monument to Transformation 1989–2009* (City Art Gallery, Prague, 2009), an ambitious exhibition and publishing project that moved outside the Europe–Russia axis to constellate the Czech Republic with countries that had undergone similar upheavals of the social and political system. The resulting exhibition and book redrew the world map in provocative ways, connecting the Czech Republic to Greece, Spain, and Portugal, but also to Argentina, South Korea, and Indonesia. The long-term research project *Former West*, initiated in 2008 and completed in 2016, also made a point of placing the postcommunist condition in dialogue with postcolonial thought, but its dispersed and discursive framework was arguably more aggregative than conclusive or propositional.<sup>13</sup>

The more recent state of play is marked, at one end, by populist exhibitions like *Ostalgie* (New Museum, New York, 2011), which elided pre- and post-transition art

10 — Boris Groys, "The Artificial Paradises of Post-Communism," in *Privatisations* (Berlin: Kunst-Werke/Revolver, 2004), 8–15. Groys describes as "idyllic" works as varied as Artur Żmijewski's video ballet of disabled bodies (*An Eye for An Eye*, 1998) and Sanja Iveković's captioning of fashion photographs with the names of women partisans who died in the struggle against the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia (*Gen XX*, 1997–2001).

11 — Marias Babias, "The New Europe: Culture of Mixing and Politics of Representation," in *The New Europe: Culture of Mixing and Politics of Representation*, ed. Babias (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Cologne: Walther König, 2005), 107. The catalogue includes a pithy timeline of Europe as a political concept from

2400 BCE to the present day; the final section is subtitled "Eastern Expansion—A Second-Class Europe?"

12 — The exhibition included Fikret Atay (Turkey), Yto Barrada (Morocco), and Kader Attia (France/Algeria), alongside artists from Eastern and Western Europe addressing Muslim identity and immigration, the Yugoslav wars, globalization, and other themes.

13 — *Former West*'s outputs aimed to broaden (but have arguably contracted) to include reflections on Europe as a whole: resurgent nationalism, precarious labor, and the construction of the public sphere. See <http://www.formerwest.org/Chronicle>.

from Eastern Europe and Russia as if no historical rupture had taken place. At the other end are progressive initiatives such as L'Internationale (2009–), a network of leftist-oriented museums across Europe that share collections, resources, and even staff. Initiated by the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, L'Internationale currently comprises six museums and an online journal.<sup>14</sup> It serves in part to promote collaboration as a means of protection against rising nationalism (and the austerity politics that often accompany it) and in part as a utopian means to denationalize cultural heritage (rejecting the homogenizing effects of globalism in favor of instigating local-to-local and transnational cultural narratives).

Today, however, almost thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it seems the European project has never looked more fragile or more urgent. One of the worst legacies of the Soviet experiment has been the reemergence of long-repressed nationalisms and religious conservatism, which have already led to the election of far-right governments in Hungary and Poland. Under Viktor Orbán, the former is experiencing the repression of any cultural production that is not “traditional, conservative, Christian [. . .] conveying a historically rooted image of a strong and proud Hungary.”<sup>15</sup> In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) polices cultural memory, especially in relation to World War II, and pressures cultural institutions to show artists “inspired by Christian values.”<sup>16</sup> For these nations, the cosmopolitanism of the European Union—which has successfully prevented war by enforcing a single trade community and free movement of individuals—is viewed as a colonizing threat to national purity, and both countries refuse to honor the EU’s recommendation to accept Syrian refugees. This xenophobic mentality is not unique to Eastern Europe, of course, and is rife in Western Europe, too. The most recent exhibitions augur a change of priorities, even an end to “Eastern Europe” as a curatorial category: titles such as *Attention! Border* and *Fear of the Unknown* point to anxieties surrounding the immigration crisis and its pressures upon national identity.<sup>17</sup> How Eastern Europe will reimagine itself in light of the Syrian diaspora is yet to be seen. In the meantime, exhibitions of contemporary art can play a modest but crucial role in checking the more general tendency towards mythic nationalism rather than the richness and complexity of cultural miscegenation.

14 — In addition to Moderna Galerija, the network includes Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (Antwerp), SALT (Istanbul), and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid). The journal can be found at [www.internationaleonline.org](http://www.internationaleonline.org).

15 — Edit András, “Vigorous Flagging in the Heart of Europe: The Hungarian Homeland under the Right-Wing Regime,” *e-flux journal* 57 (September 2014), [http://www.e-flux.com/journal/vigorous-flagging-in-the-heart-of-europe-the-hungarian-homeland-under-the-right-wing-regime/#\\_ftn3](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/vigorous-flagging-in-the-heart-of-europe-the-hungarian-homeland-under-the-right-wing-regime/#_ftn3).

16 — See Hilli Perlson, “Artists React to Poland’s Revisionist Cultural Policies,” *Artnet*, April 12, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/market/cultural-workers-react-polish-cultural-policies-775244>.

17 — *Attention! Border* (Galeria Labirynt, Lubin, and Galeria Arsenal, Białystok, 2017) focused on the eastern limits of the Schengen Area; *Fear of the Unknown* (Kunsthalle Bratislava and NTK Prague, 2017) addressed the need for communication with refugees. When “Eastern Europe” is maintained as a curatorial category, it now tends to be put into dialogue with countries outside the West, as in the shows *South by Southeast: A Further Surface* (Guangdong Times Museum, Hong Kong, 2016), which presented Southeast European art alongside that of Southeast Asia; *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2015); and *Ice Floe: Crossroads Between Eastern Europe and the River Plate Region* (National Museum for the Visual Arts, Montevideo, 2017).

# Summary of Critical Texts

CHRISTIAN RATTEMAYER

**Written from the mid-2000s to 2014, the texts that follow set out to sort through** and reorganize the debates and discourses surrounding the post-1989 Eastern European art scene through investigations of exhibitions and related practices of presentation and display, whether by Western institutions or via attempts at self-presentation by various local museums and alternative spaces. While some texts approach the challenge by way of broader historical or philosophical investigations, a number explore what it means to be geographically defined, either locally or nationally, or through concepts of regionalism that often are uneasily embraced or rejected. Others still are case studies of single exhibitions that raise larger questions. Together, they present a prism of the evolving discourse of (self-)historicization through exhibitions and their critical analysis from the determination of what constitutes the art of a certain region, to the changing boundaries of geography, and, finally, to the discussion of agency in the production of historical facts.

Piotr Piotrowski lays the groundwork here by focusing on the shifting historical identification of the broader region, beginning with the observation that “post-1989 Central European exhibitions were a sort of inspection of art from the ‘other’ side of the continent, knocking unexpectedly on the doors of the ‘right’ side of Europe.” Piotrowski reviews several exhibitions of art from the region that took place roughly in the decade after 1989, maybe the last moment when, in Piotrowski’s estimation, such exhibitions were possible. While the earliest of these aimed to assert a shared and continuous “European” culture and history, by the end of the millennium, exhibitions such as the Moderna Museet’s *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (1999) “offered a kind of closure to the post-Soviet period in European culture.” This definition, borne from a shared political sphere of influence that allowed Central Europe “to reemerge as a discursive construction” different from the old imperialist boundaries (and nostalgic imaginations) of Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in Piotrowski’s view had, by 2004, been replaced by an aporetic understanding of Europe’s boundaries, where the division between East and West had been supplanted by a new multitude of borders and boundaries that is “much more diverse in its relations with the EU . . . as well as its relation to the other margins of European culture.”

Such multiplicities also drive Edit András’s concept of Eastern Europe as a region where various oppositional pairs are under constant tension and review (West/East, center/periphery) and where increasingly different forms of marginality have multiplied, a situation in which András predicts a potential for the formerly marginalized Eastern bloc to serve the desire of international discourse to “find new points of reference in interpreting the world and to weigh our survival chances in a world full of tension, disruption, and violence.” András’s argument that this paradigm shift, with its relentless competition of global cultural production, forces Western institutions to be the ones who are “catching up” finds resonance in Ewa Opalka’s review of The Museum of Modern Art’s 2015 exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*. There, Opalka identifies “a kind of a crack between the pragmatic need for



order, classification, filling in gaps, continuity, logical implication and linearity, and a sincere desire to use the exhibition as a medium to show parallel alternatives to the art world's standard geography. A necessity to break from the old hierarchies."

Octavian Eșanu's text returns to a more theoretical discussion by focusing on the mechanisms and sociological terminologies that defined the period of postsocialist transformation, via an analysis of the model of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) that proliferated across Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Drawing from discourses of "transition" and "transitology," Eșanu applies these concepts onto the period of "historical rupture" that marked the decade of the 1990s in Eastern Europe. Of particular importance here are the networks of the SCCA and their role in removing the "barriers that stood in the way of artistic innovation, bringing the ethos of individual autonomy and individual expression from out of its former 'unofficial' status under socialism," and "shatter[ing] the belief that the state had to be the sole patron, commissioner, supporter, and judge of the artist."

In the wake of socialism's collapse, however, there emerged in Southeastern Europe what Raluca Voinea describes as the "more specific and more problematic" term, *Balkans*. Evidenced in a number of exhibitions centered on the region so termed, the "Balkans" simultaneously and paradoxically had to function as a "place of permanent change" and as a place "where history is suspended and the relationships between people have a universal character." Grounded in the political events of the Yugoslav wars, "unjustly generalized as 'Balkan wars,'" Voinea draws a telling conclusion from the opposing use of the term by curators Harald Szeemann (for the exhibition *Blood and Honey*, 2003) and René Block (for his *In the Gorges of the Balkans* of the same year, part of his *Balkan Trilogy* of exhibitions). Whereas Szeemann relied on an instantly recognizable Balkan "mentality" presented through metaphors such as spirituality, violence, or other "abused mythologems," Block aimed at a more differentiated presentation by working with local partners informed by the understanding that "perceptions of the region can start to change in the region itself."

Voinea's prediction, by referencing Maria Hlavajová's insight that the "East cannot really be considered as the 'former East' unless this challenges 'the West to rearticulate itself . . . as the former West'" could be said to form the foundation of the concluding three texts in the chapter, each of which presents case studies and discussions of specific local, national, or regional discourses, looking back from a temporal remove of two decades after the fall of communism. Lina Michelkevičė provides a succinct synthesis of the Lithuanian art scene from the 1990s to the end of the 2000s, focusing on new forms of collaboration and cooperation in collective arts practices, curatorial models, and as subject matter and material of artistic practice. Lýdia Pribišová contributes an analysis of the exhibition *60/90*, which was organized by the SCCA in Bratislava in 1997, through its reinterpretation in the exhibition *Paradox 90* (2014). And the conversation between Václav Magid and Jakub Stejskal and the Display founders Zbyněk Baladrán, Ondřej Chrobák, and Tomáš Svoboda and the founder of tranzit, Vít Havránek, provides an anecdotal history of the founding and eventual cooperation and merger of the two most important Czech alternative institutions, Display Gallery and tranzit.





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# Conversation

DAN PERJOVSCHI WITH ROXANA MARCOCI

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**ROXANA MARCOCI:** In 1996, during my visit to Bucharest, you and Lia Perjovschi staged the first Open Studio, an interdiscursive forum with artists, curators, and scholars. Did you conceive of the Open Studio to function as an alternative exhibition space? I recall seeing there an installation of costumes that Lia used in her performances.

**DAN PERJOVSCHI:** After 1989 we were suddenly in the situation of replacing outdated, impoverished, and conservative institutions. Lia and I were the “art institution.” For fifty years, Romania was cut off from the rest of the world. When we first started to travel, we did not only travel to New York, Paris, or Kassel but also through contemporary art history, through the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s that we did not know (in my art education I barely reached Picasso). It was a fantastic journey. And Lia and I used all our resources (a studio, both our careers) to disseminate the findings. This was the first stage of Lia’s Contemporary Art Archive. We collected stuff (catalogues, flyers, invitations, leaflets) and experiences (what we saw and sometimes how we participated in international projects) and then distributed it through one-on-one discussions or in group gatherings in our studio. The location of the studio was great, in the heart of the city, in the yard of the art academy. In time it became, without intention, a kind of alternative art education, because from each generation of students, some knocked on our door. The conditions were dismal (dust, common toilets, stray dogs, etc.), but we overcame them. We were young, we had energy, and the course of history had changed (fall of dictatorship, freedom of expression), which gave us power.

By 1996, we were in the second phase, organizing lectures and artist talks. We were the first to do so—you and Cristian Alexa, Mike Nelson, some designer from Stockholm, some PhD researcher from Berlin, etc. Remember? We used slides, *clack-clack*. It was also an underground training for locals on how to make a presentation, how to talk about your art, and also a source of different definitions and understandings of art mediums and practices. I look at the pictures now and see an eighty-year-old Ion Bitzan and some youngsters in their twenties. Our audiences consisted of artists, art critics, and journalists (no curators in the early 1990s). Cultural journalists of all ages came into our studio. We were very media friendly, and we took advantage of the fact that there were not many interesting art events around.

You have to imagine that the median income was about \$200 per month then, and a ticket to fly to New York was \$800. Not many artists or journalists had the opportunity to go see Walter De Maria’s *Earth Room*, for example. We were invited or got grants. So without funding we operated any way we could; if we found out someone was coming to town, we asked him or her to come give a lecture, stuff like that. Conversely, we also operated like an information center for journalists and art professionals who came to Romania. We used to do a crash course in Romanian contemporary art and the political situation for them. We had no fear. I remember one time an American delegation of journalists from the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and ten other U.S. papers coming to our studio, and afterwards they went to meet the president of the country—ha ha.

When we did an Open Studio, it was a four-day open access to an artist context. We did not stage the studio as an exhibition space. We let the place be as it was: an environment of our ideas, a place no longer to produce art objects but to debate and discuss art. Some of our art was around (like Lia's paper bodies), but it was more about communicating, meeting, exploring the fantastic potential of contemporary art-making. The Open Studios were enormously successful: we were on all the Romanian TV networks, and we even got a live show on National Public TV Channel 1. Crowds came—and stayed and stayed. We showed stuff, we discussed; a lot of ad hoc roundtables happened.

The practice of open studios came back only recently, as the dearth of exhibition spaces has forced artists to open their studios. But now it's different; it's more about the market and selling. Anyway, Lia has some huge panels with hundreds of photographs of these meetings with local and international artists and curators. Until 2005 we did a lot. A lot.

**RM: Speaking of nonconformist strategies of display, I can think of exhibitions in which your work was presented exclusively in magazine and book formats, such as in the publications *Revista 22*, *Idea*, and *Radical Museology*, and you have also made drawing installations embedded in the fabric of a city and sketches that take shape directly on institutional walls—at Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and MoMA in New York, among many others. Can you speak about these exhibition setups and why they are relevant to your practice?**

**DP:** For a long time I made my living doing drawings for various publications or designing book covers. I am in love with printed matter. For me the newspaper format is one of the best mediums—a four-, eight-, or sixteen-page gallery. I edit my own newspapers that I distribute for free during shows or re-exhibit in various contexts. I have about thirty. Books are another love story. I basically want to buy and have all the books. Every time I enter a great bookshop, I am in awe. For twenty-eight years of my life I barely had access to books due to censorship and lack of money. Now I try to avenge that.

At some point (as was happening with my newspapers) I realized that the book is a great format for my practice. I did several artist books, and more recently I've developed some project-books (such as the one with Claire Bishop). Actually, it all started with Claire asking me for some visuals for one of her conferences.

I am happy to participate in any book or magazine project. I love disseminating my drawings through these platforms. I have gotten requests from PhD researchers who want to use some of my drawings for the covers or interior spreads of their theses to make them more appealing. And I am talking about physics or medical PhDs. People google me, or they see my projects someplace and identify me by my drawings. Just look on Facebook how many of my drawings are used as profile images. I am very happy about all this archipelago of possibilities.

As for drawing on museum walls—well, this is a dream come true. I am still shocked and grateful that I can do this practice. Freestyle. Go and draw whatever I want on museum walls. Fantastic! I use any square meter as a platform for free expression, criticism, and empathy about the complicated world we live in. I draw black and white but with many colorful ideas.

**RM: Your witty, poignant drawings and texts focus on issues such as migration, war, capitalism's one percent, and cutting funding for the arts. As an artist who is an activist, as an activist who is also a journalist,**

**and as a journalist who amplifies the voice of institutional critique, what types of exhibition spaces have proved to be the most progressive in your estimation?**

**DP:** Roxana, I love every space where I am free to express—museums, art centers and galleries, newspapers, books, libraries, and now Facebook. Big museums have big audiences, mixed audiences, family audiences, and international audiences. Small artist-run institutions and galleries have art-focused audiences. Facebook is global, newspapers have their own public, and public space is for everybody (at the São Paulo Biennial, my intervention in the local subway was seen by more people than the biennial itself). I love them all. You know, I am given a kind of wild card; the curator and the museum director do not know what I will draw—neither do I. It's a trust business. I love this freedom (and the responsibility that comes with it). And because my work is more or less displayed in interstitial spaces (lobbies, stairwells, corridors, glass-walled entrances), my installations are more or less freely accessible; sometimes they are even viewable from outside, such as the outdoor wall at Kunsthalle Basel. The Tate's exclusive Members Room was open to everybody because of my project. At MoMA, everybody going to see the Richard Serra retrospective had to pass in front of my wall. (Thanks, Richard!)

I like this distribution of my art and my statements in these in-between spaces. It gives my art a broader meaning, not only within art history but also within activism and—do not laugh—revolution. In the last five or six years I became (due to social media) a sort of drawing provider. People staging a demonstration against the brutal reality of a city, people fighting to save a park, or a Roma-related human-rights group will ask me for a logo or for drawings to be placed on banners. I've done a lot of this stuff, and there is quite a feeling when you see the main boulevard in Bucharest occupied by people carrying one of my drawings. I've said this several times: I am not an activist, but my drawings are.

**RM: In 2001, the Romanian government created the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), and in 2004 the museum moved into a newly constructed wing of the Palace of the Parliament, which was built during the Ceaușescu regime to house the entire administrative apparatus of the state in one enormous building. Due to its controversial location, MNAC quickly became one of the most divisive contemporary art spaces in Eastern Europe. Can you elaborate as to why this was the case?**

**DP:** In general, there are problems with all contemporary art museums in Eastern Europe due to their monopoly (one museum per country) and political context. The best model in the region is the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, which has focused on artist archives and has a regional (not national) collection. Getting back to your question regarding MNAC, Lia and I have never stepped foot in that monster. You know there is a huge empty space around that building, which for the past twenty-seven years has been closed to the public, like a private park; the building is like an island circled by a wall. You need five thousand bodies to make a human chain around this wall, and in twenty-seven years, it was done twice: once to demand access to the communist-era secret service files, and the second time to protest against a massive gold mine that would have razed four mountains and left us with the biggest lake full of cyanide in Europe. That protest marked the biggest citizen uprising since the Romanian Revolution. In both cases, contemporary art was not on the side of justice and the people but on the side of corrupt power—inside there, over the wall.

This sheds light on the intellectual condition of an institution born of corrupt power and inhabiting one of the ugliest and most oppressive of buildings.

I think twelve years after its inauguration, the museum shows its limitations due to its physical location, which is a place where the people have been evicted and is now home to a corrupt parliament, is inextricable from its place in the public psyche. It is an isolated place in the middle of town carrying so much historical weight that nobody can escape it; some "critical" shows have even become intellectual kitsch. The huge space in the parliament building is just part of a monopoly on art spaces. MNAC owns the beautiful Sala Dalles, also located in the middle of town. It's a marvelous space that has been misused for years to get extra money (rented out for various consumer-goods-related fairs or without a proper exhibition program). MNAC also owns the Anexa, a four-story industrial warehouse converted into a place for young artists' art (capitalizing on a rough postindustrial look), and it also has some dedicated galleries at the renovated National Theatre in central Bucharest. MNAC is a dominating monster, leaving galleries and artist-run spaces the size of a napkin. Well, size matters, but it can also squash you—just imagine paying the bill to heat those spaces in minus twenty degrees Celsius, which isn't uncommon in Bucharest in winter. And that building is the parliament. Imagine if the U.S. had only a single contemporary art museum, located in the Capitol with a Republican majority.

The supreme irony here is that the most hated building in Romania has become, over the course of twenty-seven years, heavily promoted by the political power as the embodiment of a national genius in architecture and art. There are forty postcards and numerous fridge magnets featuring the Ceaușescu Parliament Palace. So the building that emptied the refrigerators of our citizens (they paid with hunger and freezing in their apartments) is now occupying the fridge.

Well, I hate that, and I do not want to be represented by MNAC. I refuse it. I boycott it. I make it small and insignificant. I do not show there, I do not sell works to it, I do not collaborate with it—I never step foot in it. Fuck it, and fuck them.

**RM: Ten years ago, Romania became an official member of the European Union.**

**How has this shift impacted the reception of contemporary Romanian art? How has the institutional landscape changed in the last twenty years? And can we still speak today of "Eastern European" art exhibitions?**

**DP:** At the critical or theoretical level, we can argue, but at the level of art production and budgets, yes, there is still a gap. There is still an invisible wall. Well, if you look at Hungary, there it is not so invisible. As a whole, the East collapsed in the market. The discussion is no longer about freedom but about the collections. Fewer artist-run spaces, more commercial galleries (and some spectacularly successful ones). There are several new contemporary art museums that have opened in Eastern Europe, but all of them face budget shortages and crushing missions (to research, preserve, restore, collect, and internationally promote their national art). It is a huge mission because in some cases these institutions are alone (one per country) and face reactionary politics (again, Hungary).

For me as an individual, but also for the exchange of art and goods, and the free movement of people, the EU was a blessing. I travel without a visa. I think my projects quadrupled because of this reality.

There is more and more equality in the way we make art, show it, and how we understand it. And this makes me, an artist born, educated, and living in Romania, feel at home in New York, Trondheim, Hong Kong, or São Paulo.



# Central Europe in the Face of Unification

PIOTR PIOTROWSKI

When speaking about European unification, or the incorporation of Central Europe into the European Union structures after 1989, we should focus on Central European exhibitions held in the West after the Fall of Nations in 1989. The answer to the question, "What was the core of the (Western) interest in newly discovered lands in the East?" is very simple: there were political reasons so obvious that they are not even worth mentioning. A much more complicated and even important question is about the interest of the East in organizing such exhibitions. To start, however, it is worth considering what the word "exhibition" means, and whether it tells us something about the exhibition itself.<sup>1</sup> It comes, as most things do, from the Greek, and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* means, among other things, "submitting for inspection, a public examination." We can go further and say that the word implies a sort of supervision or, more precisely, submitting to supervision. What is exhibited, first of all, is allowed to be publicly seen, to be on the scene, to be on the agora, and then, as a consequence, to be inspected, examined and evaluated. In other words, such an understanding of the question of exhibition has something to do with the question of power. The power is located, of course, on the side of the inspectors, who supervise what is submitted for supervision and what is exhibited. It would then mean that post-1989 Central European exhibitions were a sort of inspection of art from the "other" side of the continent, knocking unexpectedly on the doors of the "right" side of Europe.

There is no doubt that exhibition is the most crucial means of communication in contemporary art. Without exhibition what should be shown cannot be seen. As Jean-Marc Poinot has argued, "Contemporary art [maybe any art, and any cultural production—P. P.] comes to us through the medium of the exhibition."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand however, exhibition faces a dependence on the power system. The question, then, is not to challenge the exhibition system as such but rather to deconstruct a curator's strat-

egies in the context of lost or gained identity in what has been exhibited, namely of Central European culture. The focus on identity should be examined both in terms of reconstructing its history of art as well as its cultural ambitions for a new, postcommunist world. In other words, we can say that the question is: in what way did the curators of exhibitions want the art from Central Europe to be inspected, examined or supervised by the West; in what way did they want it to be presented on the agora, to be shown to the public, or—conversely—not to be neglected by the West in the process of European unification? Thus, the problems I would like to emphasize are not the Western strategies that allow the East to be on the scene but rather the Eastern (or Central European) strategies in submitting its art to be inspected.

Even though Central Europe is nearby, the West did not reveal any serious interest in the art of its close neighbours before 1989. The West looked instead at the "real other" of postcolonial studies, or at least at Russia, which occupies a special role in the Western imaginary and cultural politics. This observation applies not only to the exhibitions themselves, but also to the exhibition scholarship and scholarly discourses. Krisztina Passuth, studying a history of avant-garde exhibitions, could not find any expressed interest in that field among Western scholars.<sup>3</sup> Not even Bruce Altshuler's famous book on avant-garde exhibitions mentioned them.<sup>4</sup> One can say the same in the case of other studies, such as *Thinking about Exhibitions*, where no Central European show was analysed or even mentioned.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that the Central European exhibition discourse does not exist in the West at all. Milena Kalinovska, a pioneer among Western curators in that field, has written one of the few studies summarizing Central European exhibitions held in the West before 1989.<sup>6</sup>

1 — I am very thankful to Dr. Ewa Domanska for her discussion, critical remarks, as well as suggestions that helped to write this paper.

2 — Jean-Marc Poinot, "Large Exhibitions: A Sketch of a Typology," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 39.

3 — Krisztina Passuth, "The Exhibition as a Work of Art: Avant-Garde Exhibitions in East-Central Europe," in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930*, ed. Timothy O. Benson (Boston: MIT Press, 2002).

4 — Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

5 — Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

6 — Milena Kalinovska, "Exhibition as Dialogue: The 'Other' Europe," in *Carnegie International*, ed. J. Caldwell (Pittsburgh: The Carnegie Museum of Art, 1988).



Anri Sala. *Interview (Intervista)*. 1998. Video (color, sound), 26 min.  
Courtesy Idéale Audience International, Paris; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Galerie Esther Schipper, Berlin;  
and Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich



To be honest, there have been some comparative Central European art exhibitions organized before 1989. There was the exhibition *Expressiv. Mitteleuropäische Kunst seit 1960* [*Expressive: Central European Art since 1960*], shown in 1987 in Vienna, a year later in Washington, D.C.,<sup>7</sup> and again for another year in Vienna. A short time later, the exhibition *Reduktivismus* [*Reductivism*] appeared just after the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>8</sup> The paradigmatic exhibition dealing not only with Central Europe but also with Eastern (Russian) culture was the *Europa, Europa* exhibition in 1994 by Ryszard Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus in the Bonn Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle.<sup>9</sup> The task faced by the organizers of the exhibition was extremely difficult, particularly from a theoretical and psychological perspective. The raising of the “Iron Curtain” and the fall of the Berlin Wall allowed them to ask questions about the identity of Europe shaped by the Yalta agreement. Their ambition, however, was also to change the Yalta order.

The political context of the exhibition was quite obvious. Somewhat less obvious were its artistic premises: the eastern part of the continent was defined in a retrospective manner, because it was distinguished not just in reference to the aftermath of the Yalta Conference but also to the pre-Yalta years. Moreover, the typical Central European trends, such as the Czech Cubism that developed among local historical tensions, referred to the far metropolis (Paris) and simultaneously to the closer one (Vienna). These tensions were combined, perhaps for the first time, within the same geographical area as the art of the Russian avant-garde. The art of Austria and Germany, no doubt the historical points of reference for Central European artists (at least in the first half of the century, not to mention around the turn of the nineteenth century), was not included. The art of the German Democratic Republic, a fragment of German territory that was incorporated after 1945 into the political sphere of the East (i.e., the Soviet bloc) was excluded as well. If the threshold of World War II justified the geographical division of Europe into two parts, there were

indeed few convincing arguments to apply it retrospectively to all of the twentieth century.

At this point, however, this crucial question does not refer to historical divisions but rather to the identity or historical significance of the art produced in this region. Of course, the organizers of the exhibition were quite aware of this issue. In fact, Stanisławski admitted that his basic intention was to show the universal character of the art of the eastern part of the continent.<sup>10</sup> Reading between the lines, and sometimes even listening to the curator himself, one could realize that the primary objective of this undertaking was to valorize the art of the “other Europe” in the context of its absence from art history textbooks. The same intent was expressed through the exhibition itself as well as in its monumental catalogue. Of course, such a strategy is quite obvious. Quoting Jean-Marc Poinot once more, we can say that indeed organizing exhibitions is writing art history.<sup>11</sup>

I really believe that the Bonn exhibition showed the dimensions of Central/Eastern European art on an unprecedented scale. Regardless of all the particular objections raised in various countries from mostly Central Europe, its effects remain beyond dispute. The actual problem lies elsewhere. As a matter of fact, *Europa, Europa* did not put forth any new theoretical and methodological categories applicable to the discussion of European art in the twentieth century. Though it expanded the range of material, it did not modify the paradigm of artistic geography, and even worse, did not even articulate such possibilities.

To provoke the deconstruction of universalism, the exhibition inscribed itself in the perspective of its mythology: into the myth of European universalism as a neutral tool of writing art history. Moreover, to challenge European art history, and—perhaps more importantly—art geography, the *Europa, Europa* exhibition submitted Central European art for Western inspection using the supervisors’ value system and showed that there was no “other Europe,” just Europe.

Let me briefly discuss how the other exhibitions have been trying to avoid the geographical and historical traps seen in the case of the Bonn show. Let me begin from the present, from the exhibition *Exchange and Transformation: Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, which was

7 — Dieter Ronte and Meda Mladek, eds., *Expressiv. Mitteleuropäische Kunst seit 1960/Expressiv: Central European Art since 1960* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst, 1987).

8 — Lóránd Hegyi, ed., *Reduktivismus. Abstraction in Polen, der Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn, 1950–1980* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst/Stiftung Ludwig, 1992).

9 — Ryszard Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus, eds., *Europa, Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa* (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1994).

10 — Among the many statements of the curator to this effect, see “*Europa, Europa: An Interview with Ryszard Stanisławski by Bożena Czubak*,” in *Magazyn Sztuki* 5 (1995), pp. 223–37.

11 — Poinot, op. cit., p. 41.

shown in March 2003 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). The point of departure of the exhibition is an unspoken critique of the *Europa, Europa* show. The structure of *Exchange and Transformation* was, therefore, entirely different. Likewise, the curator's strategy went towards a very concrete definition of its subject. It was neither the art itself as an exhibition, as in *Europa, Europa*, nor an attempt to valorize art production from the region in the context of European art history. Rather, the exhibition attempted to focus on the formative processes constructing local art communities, namely international, mutual cultural exchange between several Central European art centres transforming classic avant-garde imagery. There was no twentieth-century art history of Central Europe that is more or less parallel to the canonical (Western) one, as it was in the previous exhibition. Instead, it focused on a geography of art: dynamic geographical processes reconstructed by focusing on particular places (cities) and events (exhibitions and publications).

The same unspoken critique of the *Europa, Europa* show may also be seen in the case of two other exhibitions: *Der Riss im Raum* [*The Fissure in the Room*] held at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 1994 and the next year in Warsaw, as well as *Aspekte/Positionen. 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa, 1949–1999* [*Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe*], shown for the first time in Vienna.<sup>12</sup> The subjects of these shows were defined not through formative and constructive processes but rather through geographical and historical boundaries. The first carefully presented show focused on three or four countries: Germany (or West and East Germany), Poland, and Czechoslovakia (or the Czech Republic and Slovakia). The second show, less carefully organized, gathered material from more Central European countries (with the exception of Germany and Bulgaria but including all former Yugoslav countries). Even if the catalogues employed were used to present historical material in a country-to-country manner, the exhibitions themselves tried to avoid such a schematic presentation. Instead, they stressed a comparative perspective of the history of the last forty to fifty years. However, while the Berlin show focused on the artists themselves, the Vienna show concentrated more on historical processes. It is worth mentioning that both

shows were localized in a very specific historical moment, namely the post-Second World War period, which was rather less problematic. What was problematic was the instrumentalization of historical-artistic geography. If the ambition of those exhibitions was to represent post-Yalta Central European culture, why was West Germany included in the Berlin show and Austrian art given an important role in the Vienna show? What's more, if the exhibitions focused on the postwar period, why were the Czech Republic and Slovakia separated in the first show and included with all former Yugoslav countries in the second? In both cases they were each single countries during this period—namely, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The answer is obvious. As *Europa, Europa* was involved in a political agenda, the same was true in the latter exhibitions. Politics intervened in the curators' strategies, changing their more or less clear historical premises.

Whereas the abovementioned exhibitions could be seen in a more or less ambiguous historical and geographical framework, the last ones I will mention have been defined much more precisely—at least as far as history and geography are concerned. What I have in mind here are the *Beyond Belief* exhibition in Chicago (1995) and the *After the Wall* exhibition in Stockholm (1999).<sup>13</sup> Both exhibitions concentrated on the postcommunist period. However, while the first show exhibited art from Central Europe (i.e., the eastern part of the continent except the former Soviet countries), the latter presented material from the whole former Soviet bloc. The first show collected material on a country-by-country basis and focused on particular cultural developments among mostly young artists. The second show, on the other hand, focused on young artists (not exclusively, however) and their individual art productions, and tried to avoid—as Bojana Pejić once pointed out—exhibiting the “stars” from the region who are working mainly in the West (e.g., Marina Abramović, Ilya Kabakov, Krzysztof Wodiczko). This difference in focus constituted the main difference between the two shows. To elaborate, while the first exhibition was executed in the mid-1990s, and not at the beginning of the decade, it just tested the water. The second exhibition, on the other hand, offered a kind of closure to the post-Soviet period in European culture.

12 — Matthias Flugge, ed., *Der Riss im Raum. Positionen der Kunst seit 1945 in Deutschland, Polen, der Slowakei und Tschechien* (Berlin: Guardini Stiftung, 1994); Lóránd Hegyi, ed., *Aspekte/Positionen. 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa, 1949–1999* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst/Stiftung Ludwig, 1999).

13 — Laura Hoptman, ed., *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1995); Bojana Pejić and David Elliott, eds., *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999).

*After the Wall* was organized, as I said, not according to countries but rather around the particular issues in which artists were involved. It dealt with social critique, recent history, questions of an artist's subjectivity and identity, and questions of body and gender. This last theme even had a special place, since art related to that topic was shown in Stockholm in a separate space. However, the frame of the entire exhibition was a historical background, namely the postcommunist point of reference. That was precisely the last moment when such a show was possible, simply because the post-Soviet world is disappearing, as—notably—one of the curators of the exhibition expressed very clearly.<sup>14</sup> Would we be able to find similarities in the near future between the former GDR and Armenia, or Slovenia and Ukraine, Poland and Belarus? That would be very difficult—indeed, this was something that was not so easy to accomplish during the communist period. What is even more complicated is that the previously “cohabitating nations,” such as the Czechs and Slovaks, or the Slovenians and Croats, have been split into separate countries. One of them is even seeking EU membership, while the others have less of a chance to do so. But due to EU regulations, their citizens would even face difficulties on the level of free travel, as well as economic trade. Will we be able to draw any common background between those countries in the near future? Not anymore. Except, of course, for historical background. The political geography of the post-Soviet world is disappearing and would make such exhibitions as *After the Wall* very problematic in the future. Thus, the end of the last decade of the twentieth century was really the last moment such a show was possible.

If *After the Wall* is closing the postwar history of Central European art, it does at the same time open a new discussion. Let me raise an odd question: what really is Central Europe? Is it something real, or just a phantasmagoric projection? Is the “otherness” of Central Europe contained within the context of European culture? Of course, looking to the distant past we find a Polish/Lithuanian kingdom, not as the centre of the European continent but rather as its Eastern border—facing the “real others” (the Turks). Central Europe, however, has been born as an ideological construction expressed in German political discourses, both in Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg Empire, and a little bit later in Berlin by Otto von Bismarck

leading the newborn Germany. While the first discourse and political practice was relatively open to the multiethnic communities living there, Prussian society, on the other hand, was not only oppressive but also aggressive. This is an important point to note, since this oppression is the reason for a sort of nostalgia in the postwar Central Europe that emerged from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A good example of the expression of such sentiment is the famous essay written by Czech writer Milan Kundera, “The Stolen West, or the Tragedy of Central Europe,” which can be seen exactly in the context of such nostalgia. However, even though the discourse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was less oppressive than the Prussian one, Central Europe still expressed an ideology of political domination over the nations in the East.

This is, however, not the only point of reference of such a discourse, since it aims not only at the East but also at the West. Central Europe as a political doctrine has been constructing German identity both in opposition to the East (mostly the Slavs and Hungarians) as well as Western Europe—particularly with regard to France. The philosophical discourse justifying such an ideology was, of course, Nietzsche's concept of the antagonism between “culture” and “civilization.” This opposition influenced a particularly more German than Austrian way of thinking,<sup>15</sup> and determined the idea of Central Europe as a defence of “culture” against Western “civilization,” while at the same time bearing (German) “culture” to the East.

The abovementioned political and historical background was the source of discouraging new Central European countries just after World War I, rather than encouraging them to identify themselves in such a context. However, the situation changed radically after 1945, when a large part of the European continent was incorporated into the Soviet Empire. For the most part, both cultural societies and the so-called “ordinary people” did not want to be identified with Eastern Europe, which actually meant the Soviet bloc. Timothy Garton Ash has noted that the tragedy of Central Europe was that after World War II it was incorporated into the Soviet bloc; it disappeared in order to be replaced by the concept of the Soviet bloc.<sup>16</sup> He is certainly correct that it was a tragedy

15 — Eckhart Gillen, “Tabula Rasa and Inwardness: German Images before and after 1945,” in *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country*, ed. Eckhart Gillen (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1997), pp. 17–18.

16 — Timothy Garton Ash, “The Puzzle of Central Europe,” in *New York Review of Books*, March 18, 1999, pp. 19–23.

14 — David Elliott, “Introduction,” in *After the Wall*, Pejić and Elliott, eds., op. cit., p. 11.

for this part of Europe that its cultural, social, economic, and political ambitions and development were damaged. But at the same time he is incorrect, since this was precisely the moment when Central Europe had a chance to reemerge as a discursive construction. To avoid being identified with the Soviet Union, the idea of Central Europe has been revived in the region, yet with a totally different meaning. This was the time when the abovementioned nostalgia for the Habsburg Empire emerged, particularly in countries like Czechoslovakia and Hungary, which previously belonged to the empire. Nevertheless, in almost all of these countries Central European identity worked as a sort of reaction to the political situation but did not produce any cultural unity between them—at least not in terms of art. Modernist and neo-avant-garde artists identified themselves more with the international rather than the Central European.<sup>17</sup> In actual fact, it was the dissidents and intellectuals involved in political opposition who revived the concept of Central Europe, rather than the artists.

Central European identification seemed to be very useful, both on the political as well as the cultural level just after 1989. It was at this particular moment when a series of Central European art exhibitions came to be. I am afraid that 1989 was perhaps the last, and perhaps the only moment when these exhibitions were possible. Now, when some of the Central European countries are facing unification within the EU, while other countries will apparently be excluded from that process (at least in the near future), the concept of Central Europe can no longer work as an identifying discourse. Moreover, it could even be perceived as something that would disturb the unification process. Therefore, in what way could the concept of Central Europe now work in order to create the identity of the region? Central European countries are in a very different economic and political situation. This is one reason for losing their former regional identity. The other is that after being liberated from communism, all of these countries want to forget the recent past—which actually created their regional identity in the past. If a revival of Central European discourse was a product of such a past, it means that it should be forgotten as if it were a child who experienced a traumatic experience. In other words, it means that the regional identity understood as a reaction to Soviet expansion

could be forgotten. Furthermore, if nostalgia for the multiethnic Habsburg Empire used to fulfil cultural ambitions suppressed by the Soviets, the now-united Europe can offer those countries a much more attractive identification associated with belonging to Europe. This is precisely where the region always wanted to be. This is particularly visible in the Czech Republic, which perceives itself as quite Western, both in political and cultural discourses.

What has been said above does not mean that there is no space for organizing exhibitions of Central European art in today's society. Certainly, there is such a space and it is even a necessity, particularly for historical reasons. The abovementioned LACMA show concentrates on some geographical and historical points, which I hope proves its necessity. It reveals that there is still an interest as far as the postwar period is concerned. For example, in the Central European history of art between 1945 and 1989, we would be able to find many common points of reference that could be the subject of many exhibitions. One of them could be, for example, a horizontal comparison around some particular key dates in both the history of art and politics, such as 1956, 1968–1970, and 1980. There are many topics still waiting to be discovered. In a word, I will argue that history is not problematic; the problem is with contemporary culture. In other words, Central European culture (as a discursive concept) is the historical rather than present-day point of reference. As far as contemporary culture is concerned, and particularly a future culture of the region, we should perhaps find a different discourse to describe the relation between the West and East, or the West and the so-called centre of the continent.

Now, I presume, we are approaching the crucial question dealing with contemporary European culture: the relationship between its centres—almost the same historical centres—and its radically different margins, one of which used to be Central and Eastern Europe. The crucial question, therefore, is the distance between these two factors: space and geography. The critical geography would be aimed at disclosing the centre of power, and—like feminist, postcolonial, and other deconstructive practices—would produce a discourse of a pluralistic, nonhierarchical concept of the subject, or to be more exact, on the multisubjectivity of European dimensions.<sup>18</sup> Such a study would provide a critical approach to the question of

17 — László Beke, "Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, eds. Jane Farver et al. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p. 43.

18 — See Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 14–35.

similarities and differences between the centres and margins, but also—and this is perhaps the most interesting challenge of “after the wall” European culture—between many geographical margins themselves. In addition, these studies would provide a critical approach to the question concerning a new context of Central European identity in new European cultural and political relations. What I mean here is dealing not only with the relation between the centres (Berlin, London, Paris) and peripheries (Bratislava, Warsaw, Zagreb), which used to be a subject of art-historical studies in previous decades, but also the relation with other peripheries (Athens, Dublin, Lisbon, Stockholm).

To conclude, I would say that the new European political and cultural geography would make Central European contemporary art exhibitions more problematic. Many relations between the centres and margins, different margins and different centres, and margins themselves, produce diversity. What does diversity really mean? What is the necessary condition in order to realize diversity? That is the border; borders between many spaces: the centres and the margins, the margins themselves, and borders between the “new” margins emerging from postcommunist Europe. Jacques Derrida, writing on the *aporetic* character of borders and on the “double concept of the border,” refers to the question of Europe, or—more precisely—European borders. Such an *aporia* tells us of the “passage” and at the same time “nonpassage” of the border. If the border is something to cross, it also means that it would be something not to cross. These are not opposite figures, as he argues, but rather illustrate the plural logic of *aporia*, which installs the haunting of the one in the other.<sup>19</sup> Let us note two examples of nonpassage (or *aporia*) mentioned by Derrida, and adopt them for our consideration. Derrida perfectly describes the European situation before and after the Wall’s demolition, particularly in the very heart of Europe where the Wall physically and symbolically existed, namely in Berlin. This was an experience especially and exclusively expressed from its Eastern perspective. In one case, writes Derrida, “the nonpassage resembles an impermeability; it would stem from the opaque existence of an uncrossable border.” This is the case, let us add, of the Wall before demolition, when everyone knew that a few steps away there was the border, however, no one (or almost no one) was allowed

to cross it. That was precisely the aim of power strategies, particularly in East Germany but also in other Central European countries, in which citizens, although not welcome, were allowed to cross the border, under a strictly controlled passport policy. In another case, Derrida continues, “The nonpassage [. . .] stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border.”<sup>20</sup> This is precisely what East Germans experience right now, after the unification—and, presumably, what the other Central European nations will experience soon in the space of the EU. This *aporetic* character of European borders was the precise reason for Central European curatorial strategies in submitting the local art for Western (supervisors’) inspection, and vice versa. That was also the precise reason for Western interest in seeing such exhibitions. Even now if we observe vanishing European borders, or because of them, such *aporias* are still at stake, not only because we do not remember our European experience but, above all, because we know that there are invisible borders between the centres and the margins, such as the invisible Wall in Berlin, and the margins themselves. There are also invisible borders inside the “new” margins, which have an even more *aporetic* character. Since such borders are not stable: they exist and at the same time do not exist. We can cross them and at the same time cannot cross. They are very flexible, dynamic, unstable, and much more multifaced in relation to the other margins, such as geographical and cultural margins.

More than ten years after the demolition of the Berlin Wall, we are facing a challenge to see the former Central Europe, and Eastern Europe as well, in a different context. This concept is much more complicated than Central Europe or the West. If the former Central Europe is much more diverse in its relations with the EU with regard to historical cultural centres, as well as its relations to the other margins of European culture, we shall not put our curatorial practices to submitting/supervising or surveillance/submission strategies. It is necessary to express a critical and deconstructive strategy, aiming at both the margins and the centres themselves in order to generate a new, more complex image.

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19 — Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 19.

20 — Ibid., p. 20.

# The Ex-Eastern Bloc's Position in New Critical Theories and Recent Curatorial Practice

EDIT ANDRÁS

## When the East Was Out

The ex-Eastern bloc's (and definitely Hungary's) desire to integrate into the international art scene reminds of those military troops who were not told that the war was over. In the artistic context this means that the domination of the centre, in which any smaller or marginal scene could integrate, and to which it once had to adjust if it wanted to join the modern world that counted (i.e., the Western civilization), simply ceased to exist. For now, it is common knowledge that after the phenomenon called the postcolonial turn, the disintegration of the centre gave rise to many smaller local nuclei. With it the grand narrative—that is, the canon by which one could gain access, if not to prominent places, then at least to the advantaged and well-defended temple of art—has disappeared, too. This compass which guaranteed a scale of values, together with a number of related privileges, began to break in its fundamentals around 1989, and in the geopolitical constellation that came after September 11, 2001, it lost all its functions. The place of the grand narrative was taken by a set of micro-narratives which, unlike the precedent construction, which was vertical and hierarchical, began to organize itself as a regional, crossregional, transnational and awry network, with no formal regularities. Therefore, even the special nature of the West–East axis has lost its *raison d'être*. The “privileged” and undoubtedly attention-generating situation resulting from being the “less developed” counterparty to the Western self, as a kind of projection field, does not bother anyone anymore, because marginality—as a position of discourse—has multiplied as well. In other words, all sorts of marginal positions compete for attention on the art scene thus enlarged. The belief that we must wait patiently for, or facilitate by PR actions, the world to discover us as a kind of unpolished diamond is a widespread delusion. The truth is that in order to get attention one should work for it. It is almost a commonplace that the product must be specific, local, because today nobody is interested in a mainstream product that has only been added some local colour. However, the content, the issue, the message to be communicated, must

still participate in the global public discourse, and even if it has to do it from local positions, the language must also be comprehensible for outsiders. But the mediating action of cultural translation, the exploration of the local cultural context, cannot be avoided. That is, of course, if we want to be seen and heard.

## The East Could Be In

The new critical theories seem to be in our favour. We are in the midst of an intensive international discourse, a public discourse consisting of debates, a discourse that is open and in which, at least in principle, anyone can participate. If there is a right time for it, now is the moment to get out of the peripheral situation that characterizes the ex-Eastern bloc, for the world is just waiting for the experience and the accumulated knowledge for which this region has great potential. In fact, the core of this international discourse is precisely the very desire to find new points of reference in interpreting the world and to weigh our survival chances in a world full of tensions, disruptions and violence, both at a macro and a micro level. Participation is possible, of course, but not by means of a secondhand, low-tech imitation of today's tendencies or trends of an imagined centre. If this strategy could still work in the modernist paradigm, nowadays it no longer has a chance. Artificially keeping alive or reviving any historical attitude is also not a viable option, and even less in the name of pluralist neutrality, which had always been a market imperative, an imperative which is simply a fake. Nowadays it is inevitable to pick sides and to neatly define the local and the particular position from which one speaks. (It is for this reason that the word *agency*, meaning “authorization,” “representation,” is used so often in the international discourse.) But the artificial breathing of a *passé* phenomenon does not work either, because, as it happens with age, we can imagine ourselves young and fit, we can even give this impression to others, but the younger generations know precisely that we are not part of them. However, that does not mean that we should leave the past aside. On the contrary: by modifying and

moving to the fore the concept of temporality, that is, the acceptance of the simultaneity of different temporalities, the understanding of the past and its analysis gain an extraordinary importance, but in terms of interpreting the present and its dilemmas, and by no means from the nostalgic desire to relive the past. For modernity and for modernism (in which postmodernism counts as a final act), the present only existed in relation to the future, being treated as something secondary, worthless, while the past was necessarily carved in stone and canonized.<sup>1</sup>

A changed relationship with time is one of the main arguments for the fact that, as a concept, contemporary art is used by various theorists in a narrower and more specific sense than that of art made by our contemporaries:<sup>2</sup> this term designates rather a new period, a new attitude, one that comes after modernity and is fundamentally different from it, and what reaches the centre, in the absence of a clear picture about the future, is, in the shadow of the haunting past, the intense living of the present, its exploration. Therefore, the apolitical character of the preceding epoch, its nonhistorical vision, came to be substantially eroded after 1989, and after 9/11 it became completely untenable and anachronistic. Its place was taken by the state of permanent intellectual alertness, by self-reflection and critical thinking.

All in all, in this new landscape of discourse, the withdrawal of the modernist canon unfavourable to all kinds of margins and the very large, unprecedented circle of new possible alliances have created a favourable situation: they gave the former Eastern bloc the opportunity to get out of the imaginary shadow of the Iron Curtain.

I am most certainly not speaking about the ephemeral globalism of the nineties, which tricked us with the abolition of state boundaries and wanted to knead the world into a homogeneous dough. This illusion has crumbled along with the collapse of the Twin Towers, when the construction of new walls and the establishment of new borders has begun, along with hunting an illusory enemy in places he has left a long time ago and the suspension, on behalf of this hunt, of democracies, together with the legitimization

of this “state of exception”<sup>3</sup> and the nationalist and fundamentalist political forces gaining ground. Most of the contemporary art went against this process meant to establish a new hierarchy and developed horizontal networks covering each other. In this regard, Documenta 11 [2002], curated by Okwui Enwezor, is a kind of absolute crossroad. It made clear the irrepressible need for the space of the margins and the dissolution of the centre, which never recovered after this loss of position and increasingly wanders in the land of spectacle, in the dubious meanders of the cultural industry, in the need for providing entertainment for the masses, that is, in an industry that does not need too many professional references. Many museums are trying to preserve the myth according to which they call the tune by all kinds of blockbuster exhibitions, even if the museum remained only one of the possible venues among the many biennials, alternative exhibition spaces, public spaces and community projects. In theory, the regaining of consciousness may be stated in direction shifts such as “provincializing Europe”<sup>4</sup> (the Eurocentrism may even be forgotten—it became unacceptable a long time ago), if we look from the former Third and Fourth Worlds, respectively, or that of “provincializing Western Europe,” if we look from Eastern and Central Europe. In other words, instead of chasing mirages, the formulation and articulation of relevant positions both in the production of art and in its interpretation became topical.

[...]

### East–West Return Match

The terminology referring to Eastern Europe has kind of aged lately, in part because, with the collapse of the Iron Curtain, that homogenizing name has lost its validity, in part because the roads taken by the former Soviet Union and its former satellites have also split formally. Speaking about regional relations, the new term “East-Central Europe” is meant to define a special position in Europe and, more importantly, [to denote] the fact that Russia does not belong to this category. Local scientific discourse prefers terms like postsocialist or post-Soviet, which delimit in time the collective experience and also determine a scale of intensity, while the scientific discourse overseas

1 — Boris Groys, “Beyond Diversity: Cultural Studies and Its Post-Communist Other,” in Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Chicago: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 149–63.

2 — Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); see also *e-flux journal*, no. 11 (December 2010) and no. 12 (January 2011), especially the texts on the interpretability of contemporary art.

3 — Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

4 — Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).



chooses the word postcommunism, which sounds better and louder. The theory that calls the tune nowadays speaks not only of the former East but also of the former West.<sup>5</sup> According to this theory, the East–West/centre–periphery opposition has lost its purpose.

The East is just one of the many parallel local scenes. Although this leads to a fragmentation of the attention in comparison to the prominent role of a Cold War opponent, there are also beneficial aspects of this restructuring: for instance, an increase in the value of the peripheral position and of the accumulated historical experience. At least in theory.

The proof of the pudding is provided by the exhibition *Ostalgia*,<sup>6</sup> held in the summer of 2011 in New York, which remains a powerful and trendsetting scene. Coined from expressions suggesting East and nostalgia, and used especially in an East German context, even the title seems to imply something negative. But the explicit focus on “Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics” is unequivocally negative, especially as the exhibition itself is a gigantic Russian-Soviet performance (populating all floors, hallways and nooks of the New Museum), spiced with a little “totalitarianism” and bringing “delegates” from all countries. There are, of course, great names (Bulatov, Iveković, Ondák, Stilinović, Toomik, Sala), iconic figures (Brătescu, Grigorescu, Hajas, Koller, Kovanda) and great works, but the main issue is not that but the way these works are used, to whom and to what context they relate, which is the big picture suggested and the message they bear.

The exhibition offers a casual, easily digestible entertainment, for the locals eager to escape by means of ideological shivers the flood of tourists and the summer heat in Manhattan. Perhaps the target audience is the Coney Island Russian immigrant—aristocratic, white and on the verge of extinction. Perhaps this explains the frequent references to Nabokov, although the writer’s nostalgia, if it existed at all, referred to another period. Anyway, curator Massimiliano Gioni follows Nabokov in taking the position of a curator-artist, interprets his exhibition as a “philological reconstruction of the past” and the creation of a “new fiction.” The show is haunted by a perspective reminiscent of Diane Arbus at Coney Island: the

oppressive, grotesque, poor atmosphere of the fifties. According to this scenario, Schütte’s skeletons, grey-faced with empty eye sockets and prematurely aged, and the bishop figure signed “Balka,” hidden in a dark corner and inspiring fear rather than awe, seem to play the part of bogeymen.

The kin of folklore fairy-tale characters, forced to tinker in socialist conditions, are represented by Vladimir Arkhipov’s huge collection of objects found in Soviet territory and the tools made from them, as well as by Anri Sala’s hero, Edi Rama, the artist-mayor who coloured Tirana, while the myth of the nomadic, primitive, backward world is brought to life through the shamanic objects created by Evgeny Antufiev, a Siberian under 25, who uses wolf and dog teeth, his mother’s hair and rags. The Cossack Said Atabekov promises a little savageness with a video in which “a children’s swing reminds one of a Kalashnikov”—says the explanation on the wall. The obnoxious “socialist” soft-porn photos signed by Boris Mikhailov, a genuine mascot of the art market, remind one of some low-tech home videos and occupy a display case the size of an entire hall, taking the edge off or, more precisely, adding strong melodramatic tones to the powerful conceptual work of Stilinović exhibited in the same space.

The latter deleted all the definitions in a dictionary and replaced them with the word “pain.” Tibor Hajas’s *Öndívatbemutató* [*Self-Fashion Show*, 1976] had also suffered from being put in a context meant to make it more exotic than it is: what transpires through the work is no longer a boundless desire for freedom or an intention to make the public taste a life not watched over by any higher being; because of the medium, a 13mm film, the costumes seem outdated, everything is of a dull grey, evoking rather the life sentiment of the spiritually maimed, of the disappointed, a sentiment that twenty years later, in “Goulash Communism,” was no longer a predominant attitude.

If within the category called “Eastern Europe” the [exhibition’s] selection of artists was mostly acceptable, the same could not be said, despite their numerical advantage, for the Soviet/Russian artists. Mikhailov’s slippery pornographies, as well as the collages and prints verging on kitsch signed by Brusilovski and Lobanov, evoking the atmosphere of Soviet souvenir shops, are hardly representative of the Russian scene. Zarva’s distorted portraits on the cover of the magazine *Ogonyok* (in 2001!) also do not disclose past reality, a reality

5 — See <http://www.formerwest.org>.

6 — *Ostalgia*, New Museum, New York, July 6–October 2, 2011.

See a lengthier review titled “Whose Nostalgia Is Ostalgia?” in *Springerlin*, issue 4/2011, <https://www.springerlin.at/en/2011/4/wessen-nostalgie-ist-die-ostalgie/>.

that—according to the explanation accompanying the work—has been hidden by the false realist-socialist joy of life. The only thing that these portraits allow us to see is the desire that the existence behind the Iron Curtain is to be seen again—through an “up-to-date” simplification—as something grotesque.

However, great names of the broader regional scene have been omitted, names whose absence not only makes the story incomplete, offering a much more meagre image of history than it actually was, but also further complicates the reading of works on display, even if the curatorial concept used wanted to avoid a regional-geographical review. The omission of representative names for one period or another is motivated by the curator of the exhibition through the desire to introduce new names to the New York public, other than those who exhibit regularly in the city and are almost considered American artists, whatever their origin (two examples: Kabakov and Abramović), or those who have already had the opportunity of making themselves known (such as Kozyra or Żmijewski), a point of view resembling rather that of a commercial headhunter in search of “fresh meat” and not that of an art-historical argument.

The magic phrase that always claims a sort of immunity from criticism is “personal position,” which is supposed to mean the consciousness of a life path, of a socialization, of a particular position assumed and determined by a [personal] commitment, a consciousness that, as such, is inevitably subjective and does not delude itself with the intent of revealing the only possible “objective” narrative but which definitely does not legitimate, from this only, any whim, and much less excuse someone, in the name of a curator-artist’s position, from the exigency of historical research and accuracy.

In the nineties, the New Museum was one of the most radical alternative institutions, the first that tackled all kinds of taboos and addressed social issues neglected by the nearby commercial galleries in SoHo. Today, its new incarnation on the Bowery, on the Lower East Side once populated by Eastern European immigrants and today by much better remunerated yuppies, retains its old attitudes only through fashionable slogans—even up-to-date ones—that populate its rhetoric. Behind the mask provided by buzzwords and topoi-stringing in the exhibition’s catalogue, the same dusty clichés whose encouraging disappearance is announced by the new critical discourse are smuggled in. If at a theoretical and rhetorical

level one cannot establish blunt hierarchies and subordinations, since the colonial viewpoint has become unseemly, it seems that there are still plenty of curatorial means by which the old power relations may be restored.

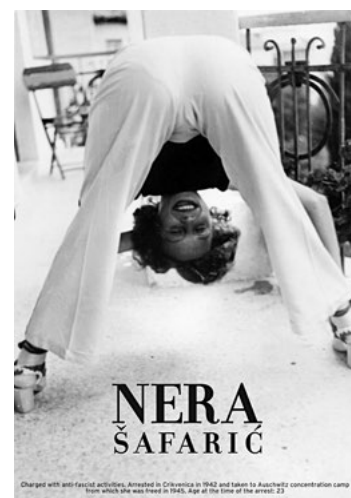
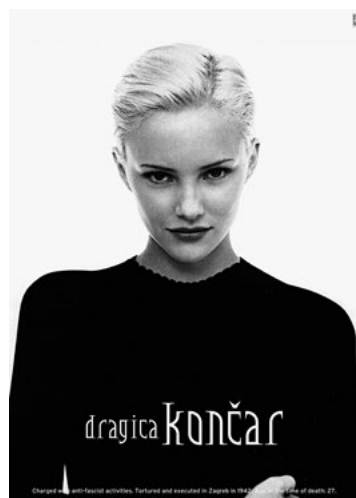
### West–West Match

If the New Museum was an old fairy who put a curse on the ex-Eastern bloc with its *Ostalgia* exhibition, then it is The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) that made an attempt to shield the region from the curse’s damaging effect by launching its Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP) project, and by its Sanja Iveković exhibition titled *Sweet Violence* [2011–12].<sup>7</sup>

If there is a loser in the changed discursive landscape—the crisis of modernism, expansion of the new critical theories, and broadening of the scene—it is definitely MoMA, once the sacred temple of modernism. Nowadays, it has to tolerate such sacrilege that would have been unimaginable earlier; MoMA and its opinion and value system are not so important anymore, as was declared by Ruth Noack, one of the curators of the latest Documenta [2007], at a panel discussion on Iveković related to the exhibition. When a local compatriot questioned what an “unknown” Eastern European woman was doing at MoMA, the answer came from the audience again, declaring that the artist is part of the canon (written elsewhere) and that MoMA is the one who is catching up. The main feature of the New York art scene is its aggressive competitiveness. If it gets knocked down, which rarely happens, but is the case nowadays as a consequence of globalization, it pulls around and reorients itself. It does not stick to dogmas or specific positions but is very flexible indeed. The point is to survive and stay in competition. Concerning MoMA, its other virtue is its self-reflective attitude, that it is able to acknowledge the change in orientation, even if that change in orientation is not favourable to the museum, so it is ready to reposition itself. We are in the midst of the dynamic restructuring of the scene in New York City, part of which is an exchange of roles.

In the nineties, one of MoMA’s (now ex-) rivals, and even a very critical one, was the New Museum, which for now has lost some of its professional prestige, offering light, easily digestible exhibitions that provide posh small-talk topics. MoMA, on the other hand, stood

7 — Roxana Marcoci, ed., *Sanja Iveković: Sweet Violence* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011).



Sanja Iveković. *GEN XX: Dragica Končar, Nada Dimić, Sestre Baković, Anka Butorac, Ljubica Gerovac, Nera Šafarić.*  
1997–2001. Six offset prints, 39¼ × 27½" (100 × 70 cm) each. Courtesy the artist

back from the spectacle and glamour of show-biz and made its audience work intellectually: in the same way as the institution itself works hard for its repositioning. Its ongoing C-MAP project is a kind of facelift, based on research (a keyword of today's discourse), which in this case means acceptance of its own limited spectrum and arbitrariness. Thus, it is doing its best to correct the "handicap" of being for quite a while the canonizing centre of modernism through learning, travelling, and networking. Our geopolitical region is at the forefront in this process of broadening the fields of interests of MoMA due to our region's accumulated experiences that have become once again relevant. In the core of this interest lies the region's politically loaded, critical and highly innovative art of the sixties and seventies, for which the umbrella term "Fluxus" is applied, covering a broader field than just one specific trend of the period.

The exhibition of the Croatian woman artist Sanja Iveković, curated by Roxana Marcoci, has been an early product of this new attitude of MoMA. As it became clear at the exhibition's press conference, the main reason for exhibiting her was not her geographical origin but her connection to feminism. The museum wanted to start to correct its narrow canon with an artist with a double "handicap." By the same means, as the sixties is currently the most fashionable period due to its oppositional and political character, feminism is also at the forefront on the basis of its criticism of the exclusive and patriarchal canon and its institutional critique; both aspects are highly relevant nowadays worldwide, even if the motivations are diverse in different geopolitical regions. In New York City, it is the rapid commercialization, institutionalization and "the state of exception" in democracies that radicalizes the art-making practices and interpretations. In our region, the overwhelming power, control and arbitrariness of the state and institutions are the engine behind this drive.

The exhibition of Iveković was very touching and thought-provoking, despite the fact that its presentation was very modest, even puritanical; it was spare. The local interpretations were based by and large on gender reading—which is not some curiosity anymore but part of the professional discourse—mostly because the feminist context was emphasized (although the text of the catalogue tries to broaden it) and because the institution was cautious about playing the Cold War card. The very political nature of Iveković's art still comes through, as it is made

manifest by any kind of suppression, whether it is political or gender based.

The third heavyweight player in the game was the Guggenheim with its big shot Marina Abramović, who after she left Yugoslavia in 1976 greatly capitalized on a strategy of radical oppositionality, a strategy that has become less and less sustainable. Her performance and installation titled *Balkan Baroque* in 1997 at the Venice Biennale was so overwhelming and moving that it received the Golden Lion award, and rightly so. However, at the Whitney Biennial in 2004, the representation of the fratricide and its violent bloodshed was narrowed to focus on the conflicted status of Serbia in relation to the European Union. The sort of appropriation of the conflict and its moulding into "Serbian martyrdom" generated harsh criticism from the artist's ex-fellow citizens in ex-Yugoslavia. Her video installation *Balkan Erotic Epic* in 2005 at Sean Kelly Gallery in Chelsea launched her overseas career, rather than showing commitment to her ex-socialist experiences. In her quite controversial reenactments of her and others' performances, *Seven Easy Pieces* [2005], one already could hardly find even traces of that cultural heritage anymore.

Instead of a compulsive assimilation into an illusory mainstream, the artistic strategy of Iveković, who remained in her native country, seems beneficial and rewarding. She takes a firm and persistent stand, and from that angle reveals the invisible traits of the issue, the canon's blind spots and its incompatibility with other parts of the world outside of the imagined centres. The worn-out slogan of Western feminism, "the personal is political," for example, is of absolutely no use when applied to feminism in East-Central Europe; better yet, the very opposite is relevant, that is, "the political is personal," which means that the politics saturate even under your skin. The reversed position is greatly revealed by Iveković's work *Triangle* (1979) in which she makes obvious the strictly monitored borders between private and public life. She is sipping whisky, reading a book, and pretending to masturbate on her balcony at the same time as Tito is visiting Zagreb and passing by with his procession. The celebrating masses and all the public spheres are under constant surveillance from the roof by armed representatives of power, and not even the artist's "private" deviance escapes view. The small photos speak relevantly about the constant control and patrolling of borders and the need to cross them, at least symbolically, by artists. The personal elements were present

in her works from the very beginning of her activity, never for their own sake, however, but rather to shed light on the social treatment of women (*Tragedy of Venus*, 1975).

Iveković confronted the anonymous models of ads with the story of antifascist partisans, thus commemorating them through her intervention (*Gen XX*, 1997–2001). In another project, she wrote the accounts of victims of domestic abuse onto billboards in public spaces (*Women's House [Sunglasses]*, 2002). In her high-profile anti-monument, a gold-plated statue of a pregnant woman in Luxembourg (*Lady Rosa of Luxembourg*, 2001) placed next to the official heroic patriarchal monument, an idealized allegorical female figure, she directs the attention of the public to the everyday violence against women. After the gender critique became accepted, she did not rest on her laurels but rather shifted her focus to other minorities. With the *Rohrbach Living Memorial* (2005) she commemorated the city's Roma victims of the Holocaust by reconstructing a group photo with the help of today's residents. This makes us aware also that feminism is not about replacing patriarchy with matriarchy, and not about narcissism either, but rather proposes a reflective attitude towards any kind of exclusion and suppression and gives voice to the voiceless.

Undoubtedly, her modest show at MoMA did not stir such a fuss as the New Museum's *Ostalgia*, as it was more an elaborated, well-

researched and professional exhibition with no fancy showbiz, and it was not supported by good old Cold War stereotypes immediately clicking in. Charles Esche, one of the participants of the panel discussion on Iveković, proposed that instead of isolated solo shows, agonistic parallel narratives should be explored. Ruth Noack put forward as an example of such an exhibition with a much wider spectrum *Gender Check* [2009–10, at Vienna's Museum Moderner Kunst], as opposed to the strategy of taking small steps one at a time.

MoMA certainly made a huge step forward, especially in comparison to itself, even if quite late, quite slow and quite vague. However, to make its compromised, exclusive and Franco-phile past forgettable, it should pick up the pace to be able to counter the superficial attitude represented by *Ostalgia* that enforced the old status quo instead of challenging it. One can only hope that the C-MAP project will turn the ex-flagship of the art world into a challenger on par with the new critical theories regarding its own curatorial practice. As for us ex-Eastern bloc-ers aware of the limited power of "fairy godmothers," our anticipation is, if not the altering of a wicked heart, at least assistance in breaking the spell or in the alleviation of its ill effect.

Excerpted from *IDEA arts + society* 40 (2011).

Translated by Alex Moldovan.

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## **Crossed Line: Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980 at MoMA**

EWA OPAŁKA

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A plexiglass box, a life-size model of an office room—two desks, one stool, a telex, a recorder, a microphone, an answering machine. The furniture and equipment by Olivetti. On its front wall two sets of headphones—not so many visitors reach for them automatically. In the headphones one can listen to something like a report or an information service about the war that is referenced in the work's title. In Italian, English and Spanish, we can read a description of David Lamelas's *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image,*

*Text and Audio* (1968). For its scale and meaning this could be the dominant work of *Transmissions*. Actually, one could say that this kind of "headquarters" could be the exhibition's center. In spite of the fact that the exhibition questions the very idea of a center. Or, at least, shows a kind of ambiguity towards it, or even wants to see a countless number of centers.

At least this is the conclusion one could get reading a curatorial text that also finds its elaboration in a conversation with Christian Rattemeyer, one of three (along with Stuart

Comer and Roxana Marcoci) curators of this exhibition, which is, at the same time, a presentation of MoMA's collection. As one can read in the press release, "The exhibition features nearly 300 works, including critical bodies of work and installations from the Museum's collection, half of which are on view for the first time." It also "explores the radical experimentation, expansion, and dissemination of ideas that marked the cultural production of these decades (which flanked the widespread student protests of 1968) and challenged established art-historical narratives in the West."

Thus the curatorial statement reveals its main thesis, that curatorial studies in search of alternative centers for the avant-garde found them in the parts of the world mentioned in the exhibition subtitle, with an exceptional focus on conceptual art from 1960 to 1980. However, the very form of the title, as well as its main thesis, raises some doubts. Is it really possible that the exhibition structure doesn't hide any center with a capital "C"? That, despite the good intentions and effort to present the dissociations, diversity and multiplicity of parallel conceptual narratives that were occurring in different parts of the world, the very title of this exhibition reveals the impossibility of ultimate withdrawal from the logic of binaries? Isn't an actual center inscribed in the title (and the exhibition) as a point of view? A starting point to the admittedly multithreaded but still linear narrative of the exhibition? And last but not least, why Eastern Europe and Latin America, and what, then, about the other parts of the world?

When asked about the motivation for this juxtaposition, Rattemeyer gives two answers. One is practical, connected with institutional background; the second is conceptual. The latter is the consequence, the result of the former; the former, despite explaining the curatorial choice, raises some questions. While the curatorial language is extremely transparent, it provides the important information that nothing more than the very structure of the institution, its administrative level, is responsible for the juxtaposition that appears in the title. Additionally, this forms a kind of opposition between the West and other parts of the world. Therefore, upon the transparent clarity of the curatorial statement there occurs a scratch, a kind of a crack between the pragmatic need for order, classification, filling in gaps, continuity, logical implication and linearity, and a sincere desire to use the exhibition as a medium to show parallel alternatives to the art world's standard

geography. A necessity to break from the old hierarchies.

The exhibition begins in the lobby on the sixth floor where, next to the entrance, one can see Eduardo Costa's work *Names of Friends: Poem for the Deaf-Mute* (1969). This 8mm film loop presents the artist himself soundlessly spelling the names of his fifty-three friends. The lack of sound, typical for 8mm film, in the work that opens the exhibition acts as a kind of introductory statement about the difficulties of communication. As a metaphor for the transmission of ideas, in an exhibition about the spreading of ideas, this can provoke anxiety.

In the first room, on the contrary, one can enjoy the comfort of overwhelming communication transparency, formal and aesthetic order. At this stage the transmission occurs without interference. It introduces the theme of the line, which seems to encircle the whole exhibition. In this room it is drawing a loop, a meander, an ellipsis, a circle and, finally, turns itself into the spatial form of a sphere. One can see the line in the canvases of Julije Knifer, Victor Vasarely, François Morellet and Ellsworth Kelly, and creeping into the paintings displayed in relation to sculptures, from Julio Le Parc's kinetic box through Piero Manzoni's kaolin on canvas to Jesús Rafael Soto's wire and oil. Then the line opens up into the cuts on Lucio Fontana's canvas and transforms through Lygia Clark's *Bichos*, the sculptures of Soto and Sergio Caramago, and Mira Schendel's *Little Nothings*. Finally it melts into the "white noise" of Morellet's works and Le Parc's glittering box.

For the artworks assembled in the first room, the point of reference, on the historical and geographical level, is the exhibition *Art Abstrait Constructif International* [*International Constructive Abstract Art*] that took place at Galerie Denise René in Paris in 1961. Denise René was a gallery that claimed that for the avant-garde it is necessary to create a space for an exchange of ideas. Therefore the gallerist organized exhibitions with artists from Eastern Europe (Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, among others), as well as artists from Latin America. The constructivism mentioned in the exhibition title was the first link for the East–South line. Constructivism, as one of the keystones of the Russian avant-garde before the Second World War, had a very strong impact on the Eastern European art world. At the same time, it was an important point of reference for Latin American artists—for example, the Argentine Le Parc or the Venezuelan Soto during their residencies in Paris used to refer to



constructivism as the basis of their research in the field of kinetic art.

In the context of Latin America, constructivism was used in reference to nature, and often adopted a ludic character, which can be seen in the kinetic objects. This joyfulness and desire to experiment is something completely different than what can be seen in the constructivist tradition in the Eastern bloc, with its connection to the prewar Soviet avant-garde and its ideas of transnationality with a strong communist background. The Yugoslavian artists (who were not, as the curators correctly stress, limited to socialist-realism) exhibited in the first part of the MoMA exhibition, such as Julije Knifer, Dimitrije Bašičević (Mangelos) and Josip Vaništa, didn't so much question art institutions as produce more fundamentally nihilistic work. Their manifestations of their lack of political agency, the void standing behind the artistic gesture—this is the background of actions such as those by [the Croatian artists' group] Gorgona (1961–66). This phenomenon reveals something very interesting and very characteristic of art from the Eastern bloc. Namely, it shows how a desire to continue the tradition of the prewar avant-garde relates to a fundamentally utopian belief in the impact of art on a political agenda.

For Gorgona and other anti-art groups, such as the Yugoslavian OHO (1966–71), Aktuální umění from Czechoslovakia (c. 1964), and the Venezuelan group El Techo de la Ballena (1961–68), the main means of artistic expression, besides mail art as the ultimate device of transgressing borders, was editing independent magazines and books. The curators of the exhibition want to see this practice as a manifestation of "skepticism toward authority, including that of art itself, [that] emphasized creative production outside a market context." While this sentence, presenting capitalism as a form of (oppressive) power, is adequate to the collective from Caracas—inspired by the socialist revolution in Cuba, writings of the Beat generation, and surrealism—used in the context of Eastern Europe, it raises some questions. Even in regard to Yugoslavia, the country most open to the Western market, the negation of authorities and state in the Eastern artistic environment was more a reaction to mechanisms limiting the freedom of artistic expression than a pure critique of capitalism. This portion of the exhibition, along with several others, reveals some lack in the curatorial concept in building analogies between Eastern Europe and Latin America.

The line, as a dominant visual trope of the exhibition, organizing it in a structural, formal and symbolic way, in the first room is more vivid and entangled; in the "anti-art" room, it paradoxically behaves more civilly. It runs linearly and accompanies the chronological order of the presentation of performance art [archival] records. Among this huge number of files, only a very astute and patient observer would recognize the line in the forms of ropes, ribbons and curved sticks in Milenko Matanović's photographs of [OHO group's] *Summer Projects* (1969) or, in a diffused way, in the works of El Techo de la Ballena. In one issue of [the group's] magazine-manifesto *Rayado sobre El Techo de la Ballena*, one can see a photograph with a series of thin, white stripes or rays covering its surface in a manner that makes it almost impossible to see the image underneath. Thus another meaning of the *Transmissions* line emerges: it is no longer a metaphor of continuation, communication, the spreading of ideas; it is their opposite, a line that deletes or distracts from a message. That communicates, above all else, the lack of any unequivocal communication through images.

Works by Dimitrije Bašičević (Mangelos) and Josip Vaništa presented in this part of the exhibition give further meaning to the line within the context of conceptual art's idea about the dematerialization of the artwork, and increase its significance for *Transmissions* itself. Vaništa in *übermalung* (overpainting) (1959–65)—a work that is materially based on photography of an exhibition of landscape painting—made the gesture of "overpainting the abstract," whereas Mangelos in *Manifest de la relation* (1976) and *Manifest diguraski* (1977–78) overpainted globes. The line, as taken from school notebooks, runs along in parallel with text inscribed within. The meaning and form of the text again seems ambiguous. On the one hand, it postulates building transgressive relationships; on the other, it highlights the inevitability of the dematerialization of art. Doesn't dematerialization as a continuation of the idea of nonobjective art—the basis of Soviet constructivism—presented in the context of global networking, the idea circling the world, sound ambivalent? If the prewar Soviet avant-garde, with its dream of an art that, as communism, knows no borders, had been utopian, then the utopia that Gorgona's artists practiced was converted into nihilism. From this perspective, dematerialized art could be transgressive and nonexisting at the same time.

The next part of the exhibition introduces more information about the structure of itself. The lines tightly wrapped around the artists from Eastern Europe and Latin America split up and start to loosely intertwine. The artistic positions seem still parallel, but it would be pointless to search for close analogies. It calls to mind jazz improvisation, the intersecting of musical themes, with their polyphony and relations between main themes and counterpoints. There is still a linear presentation (from 1960 to 1980), but one can find here the sinusoid of the dynamics of political engagement inscribed in the display. From the activist increase to the political withdrawal, from Eastern European artists' detachment to the direct political engagement, to the Latin Americans who come on stage wielding the mass media.

The dialogue with the mass media initiated by Instituto Torcuato di Tella from Buenos Aires between the 1950s and 1970s is presented here with three strong examples. Beside David Lamelas's *Office of Information about the Vietnam War*, mentioned above, there is Marta Minujín's *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* (*Simultaneity and Simultaneity*) (1966), and Oscar Bony's *60 Square Meters and Its Information* (1967). The first takes the form of records documenting part of the action *Three Country Happening* that Minujín held together with Allan Kaprow and Wolf Vostell in Buenos Aires, New York and Berlin. This was transmitted simultaneously on television and was one of the first attempts to make use of mass media in the visual arts. The second, found behind Lamelas's *Office of Information*, is one of Oscar Bony's most famous works and a key example of the marriage of mass media and conceptual art. The "sixty square meters" consist mostly of wire mesh stretched on the floor. While walking on it, one can feel quite insecure, being confronted at the same time with a projected 16mm film of the wire mesh itself. The experience of insecurity is the result of two factors: the physical awareness of mediation by the senses, and the additional mediation by the film. This is the essence of Bony's and Lamelas's works in relation to the very character of information. The medium may bring us closer to it, but, at the same time, it holds us back from what is represented. The juxtaposition of these works shows how conceptualism took into account the possibility of the widespread and significant influence of art and, at the same time, put this into question.

The question also appears in Lea Lublin's work, an artist born in 1929 in Poland, but

growing up in Argentina. In her work *Interrogations sur l'art, Discours sur l'art* (*Interrogations into Art, Discourse on Art*, 1975), each of a series of questions ("Is art a system of signs?"; "Is art an illusion?") turns a different color. Lublin's work, primarily conceptualizing the problem of painting, is followed by Alejandro Puente's laboratory of colors *Todo vale. Colores primarios y secundarios llevados al blanco* (*Everything goes. Primary and secondary colors brought up to white*) (1968–70) and Henryk Stażewski's *Colored relief* (1963), while behind them one can find a strong Polish color accent in the form of Edward Krasiński's "blue Scotch tape." The room presenting Krasiński's work is a kind of adaptation of the Warsaw studio he inherited from Stażewski. It additionally displays the artist's encounters with Daniel Buren and André Cadere, and their spontaneous expositions with the dominant theme of horizontal and vertical lines. Here also is Krasiński's *Spear* (1963–64) hanging in the air—a line falling apart into smaller and smaller fragments. This is the way one could see it when it was first presented at the Foksal Gallery Foundation in 2013. For a person from Poland, this type of presentation works as a mechanical transposition, a kind of "copy-paste" operation from a primary context into another.

The context of the Polish artists presented in the exhibition requires a digression to elaborate the problem of the research program preceding the exhibition. As Rattemeyer pointed out, the aim of the five years of research dedicated to conceptual art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, besides its meritorious and cognitive aspects, was filling gaps in MoMA's collection, which means acquisitions. This means that, if we take into consideration, for example, the Polish art, all these works presented in *Transmissions*, besides a Stażewski relief acquired in the '60s, were bought during the last five years. When asked of the criteria of choice, Rattemeyer replied that, for the curators, the most important aspect was to consult the representativeness of works with professionals from the local context and to answer the question: "Does everyone in Poland agree that Stażewski, Krasiński and Ewa Partum are masters? Does everyone in Romania agree that Ion Grigorescu and Greta Brătescu are the most important artists from the '60s and '70s, or not—and if not, who is?" While conceding the limitations of this consensus, Rattemeyer himself agrees that besides the research itself, the choices also reflect the situation of the global art market.



Installation view from the exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*.  
September 5, 2015–January 3, 2016. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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The choice of Ewa Partum's *Autobiografia* (*Autobiography*) (1971–74), presented here with other feminist artists, could be the outcome of the meaning it has in the exhibition context. Among the names of the famous historical and contemporary male artists that are the “material” of this work—a lettering system building the artist's name—one can find some who are themselves included in *Transmissions*. In a broader context, the feminist works presented here are focused on reflections on the construction of femininity, at the same time they introduce the theme of an intensification of political and activist tendencies in conceptual art. With regard to the counterculture movements after 1968, *Transmissions* is heading towards the '70s. As one can clearly see, women's art is defined here mostly in terms of self-reflexivity and the analysis of the influence of the media and consumerism on ways of constructing (gender) identities. So we have the Sanja Iveković video with the Coca-Cola bottle in the lead role (*Slatko naslije* [Sweet Violence], 1974) and her collages with the pages of Western women's magazines (*In the Apartment*, September 1975 / “Elle,” March 1975, 1975). There is Marina Abramović in *Rhythm 5* (1974/94) and, last but not least, a series of works oscillating around the form of self-portrait: Geta Brătescu's *Towards White* (*Self-Portrait in Seven Sequences*) (1975), VALIE EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) and VALIE EXPORT SMART EXPORT (1970), and Ana Mendieta's *Untitled* (*Glass on Body Imprints—Face*) (1972).

It is also worth adding that this group of works by illustrious female feminist artists included (this inclusion is already an almost classic gesture) work by Tomislav Gotovač, namely his film *Kružnica* (*Jutkevič-Count*) (*Circle* [*Jutkevich-Count*], 1964) and his famous sequence of photographs with the artist half-naked *Showing Elle* (1962). As Roxana Marcoci wrote in her essay, Gotovač—the Croatian anarchist and performer in love with the medium of film—“opened up a set of critical questions about male-female relationships, the dynamics of desire, the tension between real and imaginary and the antithesis between images of a distant consumer society and the everyday reality of a socialist world.” And again, one might question the last part of this statement. As a matter of fact, for parts of the Eastern bloc, especially Yugoslavia, the '70s were a time of partial opening up to the West, including to consumerism. Ipso facto, consumerism was within the critical purview of local artists. Nevertheless, the question remains if this fact

authorizes building an analogy between the Eastern bloc experience and the experience of the actually capitalistic countries of Latin America? And can (Eastern bloc) feminism, as I have understood from the curators' statement, be reduced to the problem of the contestation of the capitalistic category of female beauty invented to sell goods?

One might believe that, actually, the beginning of resistance to the mechanisms of the predatory capitalism that fed upon the delicate substance of the social fabric took place somewhere else, in the countries of South America. These countries—exposed to social inequalities and political destabilization connected with military dictatorships, as well as problems that were a direct result of the foreign policies of the United States—hadn't consolidated democratic standards. The next part of the exhibition seems to acknowledge some of these facts, presenting the work of such artists as Álvaro Barrios and Beatrice Gonzáles (Columbia), León Ferrari (Argentina) and Hélio Oiticica and Carlos Zilio (Brazil); the fundamental themes of this display are social and economic inequality, and the central figure, family.

Oscar Bony's *La Familia Obrera* (*The Working-Class Family*) is part of the artist's performance archive. For this performance, [which Bony staged in 1968 at the *Experiences 68* exhibition at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires,] the artist used the exhibition's production funds to hire a working-class family to sit on the plinths in the gallery for eight hours a day, earning twice as much as the father would earn at his factory job. Vis-à-vis the working-class family one can also find Fernando Botero's painting *La Familia Presidencial* (*The Presidential Family*) (1967), presenting the Columbian head of state with his immediate family, a bishop, a general, a dog, as well as the “court” painter located [in the background]. The figure of the painter drawn into the canvas brings to mind Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), and on the whole, the work recalls the famous Goya painting in which the artist portrayed the Spanish royal family in all their ugliness (*The Family of Carlos IV*, 1800). The juxtaposition of families in the work of Bony and Botero is supplemented by Marisol's *The Family* (1962), followed by the artist's other well-known sculpture of the same year, *Love*—a bottle of Coca-Cola vertically stuck into an open mouth—executed in the Venezuelan pop-art style. At this stage, the exhibition is curling to its end. In the feminist room, the line that guided the public through *Transmissions* has turned into the film looped in Gotovač's

projection, then it dematerialized and converted into a sound wave. The jazz so beloved by Gotovač is emanating in the last part of the exhibition. Jazz that nowhere as much as in New York brings to mind a busy street introduces into the exhibition the theme of activism in the political field, often happening on the streets. This is juxtaposed, in a way, with its reverse—the artists' actions in reaction to political oppression that take the form of ephemeral gestures, and of withdrawal from the public sphere to studio space. In the physical domain, they are separated by a wall that is tightly filled with posters, a mix of works from Eastern Europe and Latin America. Graphic design, as a medium that was less exposed to the operations of censorship, is presented, paradoxically, in the aesthetics of horror vacui.

[The room on the other side of the wall] displays work of, among others, two artistic duos (Liliana Porter and Luis Camnitzer, Ion Grigorescu and Geta Brătescu) who chose to go back to their studios. Often experimenting with different media, they, the curators claim, present the mature form of conceptualism. These works are defined by their close relationship to science. They could take the form of a repetition of the circle figure, as in Porter's *Untitled (Circle Mural) I* (1973) or Běla Kolářová's series of "fake negatives," which relate to the experience of synesthesia (*Radiogram of Circle*, 1962–63). The theme of searching for the invisible, for mathematical structures hidden behind the perceptible, is further elaborated in Dóra Maurer's works. There is also Brătescu's *The Studio. Invocation of the Drawing* (1979), in which the artist explores the relations between the studio space and her own body, and her series *Medea's Hypostases* (1980), in which she used the subtle form of a handmade stitch as an answer to a political horror that almost chokes.

On the other side of the wall, the South American activists CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte) are represented by deconstructive interventions against the Augusto Pinochet government. In turn, the Eastern bloc, not lacking a sense of humor, is presented in this section via Braco Dimitrijević's *Casual Passer-by I Met at 4:30 p.m., Berlin* (1976). This photographic documentation records the artist displaying portraits of "common people" in public spaces in Zagreb, portraits produced in the aesthetics of the large-scale banners featuring communist leaders that were made for socialist parades. Besides Dimitrijević, there is also Jiří Kovanda with documentation of his action *Contact* (1979), a walk through Prague and encounters with

random people, and Józef Robakowski's *From My Window* (1978–99). In the gallery, the piles of documents are back, with a huge amount of leaflets and names. The direct juxtaposition of artists from Europe and South America is bound by their urge to express themselves in the public space, although the gradations, motivations and even stylistics of their political protest are very different. Reducing this to a lowest common denominator would be a simplification.

The last part of *Transmissions* is focused on *Video Trans Americas* (1976), an expansive installation by Chilean artist Juan Downey living in New York. On the floor one can see the contours of two Americas. The line guiding the public through the exhibition is back in the shapes of the two continents, and then finally takes the form of the concentric circles in another of the artist's works situated [outside the show's exit]. At specific points in the map of the two Americas, one can see video monitors showing aboriginal inhabitants of Central and South America—their rituals and everyday life. While traversing the Americas in Downey's installation, one is participating in encounters with "otherness, which functions as a metaphor for understanding [one's] own cultural identity, which is central to the exhibition's thesis of possible counter-geographies, realignments, alternative models of solidarity, and ways of rethinking the historical narratives of postwar art."

If the central thesis of *Transmissions* is the searching for cultural identity, then it would more specifically be the identity of *Homo occidentalis*, the citizen of the USA, and maybe even the inhabitant of New York City (if not the employee of The Museum of Modern Art). Is this true? When asked if *Transmissions* is an exhibition mainly for the American public, Christian Rattemeyer replied by calling on the statistics of MoMA's audience (only 40% of it is from the USA). But the exhibition's point of departure is stated as clearly as the work of Juan Downey (an artist of Chilean roots but based in New York) makes us think. Its location makes us go through South America to reach North America—the USA and New York are the destinations. This is the place where one can make the effort to understand one's own identity through contact with an other. Downey's installation suggests the audience's journey through the exhibition and reflects the travel of MoMA's curatorial research group. And if the precision, structure and logistics of this research and its outcome in the form of such a dense and multi-threaded exhibition is impressive, what pinches is the schema that stands behind it, taken

directly from the very internal administrative structure of the institution. A structure that divides [the institution's research group] into departments (the Latin American Department, Eastern Europe Department, etc.) and that, as the very subtitle of the exhibition reveals, can transmit the message of binary oppositions, the world divided into two, where there is the West and the other parts of the world. This schema, probably highly difficult to omit in the case of a presentation of the museum collection, seems to be contradictory to the central trope organizing the exhibition—the unruly line that symbolizes the prewar avant-garde, minimalism,

abstract art as a means of expression and the specificity of intricate relations between the artistic environments from distant parts of the world. A line that takes different forms and goes through different fields of art and media. A line that is a connector, a link, a telephone cable, a transmission line, that diffuses itself into a sound wave, dematerializes itself, but is still present. Unfortunately, one can hardly be rid of the impression that this line, which wants to be a connection, at the same time works as a dividing line.

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## “During”: The Transition to Capitalism

OCTAVIAN EȘANU

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[...]

### **The Cultural Transition: The SCCA Model**

What were the repercussions of the discourse of transition to democracy and to market economics in the arts, and what are the traces of this discourse of modernization within the field of the fine or visual arts? As belief in a more just sociopolitical order came to fill the ideological vacuum left after the collapse of Marxism-Leninism, some associated ideas soon emerged in the domains of art and culture. In the arts, the term “transition” came to express, above all, the desire to break with the previous ways in which artists interacted with society and the state. Since the earliest days of socialism a certain category of artists had become very critical of the way in which the communist state treated its intellectuals. After the death of Stalin, many so-called “unofficial” or “nonconformist” circles emerged in socialist countries and some of the USSR republics, mainly as a form of protest against the cultural policy of the socialist state. The transformations that took place during the 1990s were in many respects based on, informed by, and even carried on by many of those who had been part of the unofficial or dissident traditions. Their dissatisfactions revolved, generally speaking, around the belief that the state has no right to interfere with artists’ work with regard to either artistic form or content, or with their exhibitions or interactions with the public. Their main

aspirations were toward the emancipation of art from the control of the state; art was to gain or regain its autonomy and become, as in the enlightened Western societies, unaccountable to the institutions of power: no more kings and popes after the Enlightenment—no more state bureaucrats and Party activists after socialism.

This segment of transition, therefore, headed in the same direction as it did in other spheres of social life: away from the state, away from a model in which an artist is either within or outside the boundaries of the Party’s official cultural policy; away from circumstances in which it seems there is only one possible way of making art; away from the mass-membership system of the Unions of Artists that offered artists benefits no capitalist institution would ever offer but only if they could at least pretend that they embraced the classicizing pathos of socialist realist aesthetics—a doctrine that, while not followed with equal rigor everywhere, nevertheless remained the official cultural policy in the countries of the socialist camp. Meanwhile, the transitional period brought to the surface a series of new questions: What was to be the role of the arts and of the artist in the new social order; how should one perceive of the artist’s relation to his or her work, colleagues, and audience? Who will see to the artist’s economic interests? To help answer some of these questions, a number of Western private and governmental organizations stepped in. The Open



Society Institute has been the most active in this field, launching its network of Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA), a program that today cannot be ignored if one is to understand the changes that took place in the art of the former East bloc over the past decades.

The transformations that took place in art were neither less dramatic nor less intense than those that occurred in other spheres of social life, and the impact of such institutions as the SCCA on art, culture, and cultural policy may very well be compared to the impact of such key international instruments of transition as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, whose policies have fundamentally affected political and economic policies in the former socialist countries. Unlike other private and public foreign foundations and programs that mostly provided resources for art and culture, the SCCAs were both financing and enacting mechanisms: they designed special programs, projects, and policies; promoted the newest art media and formats of display; and educated local artists on matters of cultural management and fundraising. Most importantly, they acted as one entity through the coordinated efforts of twenty art centers that expanded across the entire post-socialist map, from Prague to Almaty.

The SCCA network sprouted from a small program of Soros Foundation Budapest called the Soros Fine Arts Documentation Center.<sup>1</sup> The program was established in the mid-eighties, at a time when the official cultural policy of socialist Hungary—a system of division known as the “three Ts” (under which culture was Totally Supported, Tolerated, or Totally Banned)—had begun to break down. The first significant shift, or the artistic transition proper, began in 1991, when the Soros Fine Arts Documentation Center was renamed the “Soros Center for Contemporary Art.” With the full support of George Soros and under the directorship of Suzanne Meszoly—the Australian artist and curator of Hungarian descent who worked on the idea of a broader Eastern European art network while still employed by the Soros Fine Arts Documentation Center—the renamed program was gradually expanded into eighteen

postsocialist countries and former republics of the USSR. By the late 1990s, twenty centers, interconnected through diverse regional projects and initiatives, worked together toward adjusting local artistic scenes to the new socio-economic regimes, seeking meanwhile to integrate these scenes within a broader Western, or global, contemporary art world.<sup>2</sup>

The ideas that informed the mission and activities of the SCCA program were the same that influenced the philanthropic activism of George Soros. Over the years the main source of inspiration for Soros remained the writings of his distinguished tutor at the London School of Economics, the influential liberal thinker and philosopher of science Karl Popper. The name of the managerial group that coordinated the work of his foundation, the Open Society Institute, points to one of Popper's best-known works of social theory: *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. When the book was first published in 1945 it resonated with the concerns of a world divided over incompatible political doctrines. One of the main postulates of Popper's social theory is the idea of fallibility; that is to say, human beings are capable of making mistakes, of being fallible, and truth is only an ideal toward which all knowledge must tend—a conclusion to which Popper had arrived earlier in his works on the philosophy of science. In a better social order, which he called the “open society,” no one can claim the right to hold the truth; instead, truth is the result of an ongoing negotiation between the people and the state through the intermediacy of various institutions that need to be constantly developed and improved. An open society can only take shape when people realize the danger of certain philosophical doctrines, put forward by those whom Popper has designated as “enemies of the open society.” Throughout the book Popper criticizes authoritarian tendencies in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx, suggesting that these thinkers must be held responsible for modern forms of totalitarianism, for so-called “closed societies.” Popper is especially critical of Hegel and Marx and, in particular, their conviction that history has one meaning—that there are universal laws of history, which, once discovered and understood, can be tuned to accommodate

1 — “The first SCCA was established in Budapest by the Soros Foundation Hungary in 1985. In 1992, two additional SCCAs were opened in Prague and Warsaw, and in 1993–94, the network expanded to a total of 16 SCCAs. By 1998 there were 20 SCCAs located in 18 countries.” For a short history of the SCCA network, see Nina Czegledy and Andrea Szekeres, “Agents of Change: The Contemporary Art Centers of the Soros Foundation and C3,” in *Third Text* 23, no. 3 (2009): 251–59. See also the websites of C3 in Budapest (<http://www.c3.hu/scca/>) and scca Zagreb. <http://www.scca.hr/eng/history.html>.

2 — The network's mission was set in the following terms: “The SCCAs are open art centers. They maintain information on international grants, scholarships, arts programs, exhibitions, and other events . . . The SCCAs support artistic experiments which broaden the aesthetic borders of visual culture.” From the “SCCA network” brochure published by the Open Society Institute, Budapest, 1998.

the needs of humankind. It is this kind of “historical” thinking that Popper believes has led to totalitarian politics, to social “tribalism,” revolutions, and social unrest. Consistent with a liberal understanding of history, Popper argues that history instead comprises particular and often accidental events—that there are many histories, that there cannot be one but a multitude of historical interpretations, none of them final. In other words, all interpretations are fallible and in need of constant improvement.<sup>3</sup>

These ideas—presented here very briefly, and only in order to outline the intellectual background that has informed the cultural transition—became guiding principles in the agenda of the Open Society Institute and, by extension, of the SCCA network. Although neither Popper nor Soros gave serious thought to, or showed particular interest in, matters related to the art of their time, one can see some of the key concepts of the “open society” at work in the activities of the SCCA program and the new art that it promoted. We can say that “contemporary art”—the phrase that stood for the new paradigm popularized by these offices in the former socialist countries—was the art most suited for an open society; it was the model that did not affirm or set any firm aesthetic or political truth, belief, or doctrine, leaving everything uncertain and fallible—open and ready for continuous negotiation and contestation as expected of an open society. Contemporary art was to be understood as the open and democratic model that came to guarantee artists their freedom of expression; it was presented as the art that had inherited and carried forward the most advanced and progressive ideas in Western culture, and which therefore could be transplanted to Second World countries [...]

The new model contrasted sharply with those artistic institutions the artists themselves were most familiar with. Indeed, during the implementation of the SCCA program some centers found themselves in opposition to local Artists’ Unions (professional associations of artists akin to socialist trade unions)—an opposition that, while not necessarily confrontational, persisted due to contrasting missions, modes of operation, and functions.<sup>4</sup> The Artists’

Union was an organizational model under socialism, one whose task of supporting artists was closest in its mission with that of the Soros Centers. Of course, the roles of Creative Unions varied from country to country, and yet formally, at least, most of them still remained the *official* institutions for regulating the lives of artists, writers, or musicians under socialism.<sup>5</sup> Aside from having a similar goal—namely, that of supporting artistic production and distribution—the two differed significantly in their forms of organization and modes of operation. Here are just a few differences: unlike an Artists’ Union, which supported only its members (e.g., painters, sculptors, and graphic artists), the Soros Centers were formally open to anyone who could produce quality art or new, preferably *nonpolitical*, original, contemporary art projects in one of the most popular media formats (installation, multimedia, video); unlike the unions, which were dedicated only to those who had received professional training in an established art school, the Soros Centers were open for collaboration with all artists regardless of their education or experience; and unlike the unions, which oversaw almost all aspects of their artist-members’ lives—from offering exhibition space to allotting (through artists’ funds) government commissions, studios, and materials, as well as apartments, holiday trips, pensions, and subsidized kindergarten facilities for children—the SCCA operated on a time-to-time basis, offering only contractually based grants, or renting and subcontracting goods and services through third-party agents, often through a publicly announced tender.

The centers differed in every crucial respect from the unions. First and foremost, they had not been established to represent the interests of large masses of artists. Resembling contemporary corporate management in practice—with a board of experts consisting of art historians and critics legislating the activities of the executive managers in offices (unlike the local unions, ruled by collectively elected committees of

3 — Here, I assimilate some of the ideas expressed in Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Golden Jubilee Edition (London: Routledge, 1995).

4 — In those parts of this text where I discuss the differences between the SCCAs and the Artists’ Unions, I draw primarily on the situation in the former Soviet Union, with which I am most familiar, as well as on my personal experience as the founding director of the SCCA Chisinau, Moldova.

5 — Within the socialist bloc, Artists’ Unions played a decisive role in regulating cultural life. In some countries they held a stronger grip on the art world than in others. In Poland, for instance, where socialist realism had lost its sway by 1954 (a year after the death of Stalin), the Union of Polish Artists (ZPAF) was, by 1980, part of the Solidarity movement and thus operating underground. But even in Poland, where ZPAF was also partially supporting independent, so-called “unofficial” initiatives and artists (e.g., Galeria Foksal or Krzysztofory, both associated with Tadeusz Kantor), Artists’ Unions remained the *official* organ to organize the lives of artists—to provide low-rent studios or the opportunity to exhibit. See Anda Rottenberg, “Between Institution and Tradition: The Artist in Search for Freedom,” in Laura J. Hoptman, ed., *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1995).

artists)—the Soros Centers promoted and supported within local art communities primarily what was regarded as new or “cutting edge”: the latest trends in contemporary art, art criticism, and cultural management. This program launched the earliest exhibitions of contemporary art, often accompanied by symposia and workshops held by Western artists and curators or regional and East-West international collaborations. In addition, the Soros Centers served as a resource base—collecting and distributing information on local and foreign art, providing access to information, inspiring artists to explore and experiment with new media, and providing training in project planning and grant writing.<sup>6</sup>

Consistent with a liberal understanding of history—history understood as many particular histories of the sporadic advance of freedom and liberty—the Soros Centers brought to the public’s attention new types of truth, introducing a large array of themes and motifs to the local art scenes. Events financed and organized by the centers dealt with issues of identity politics as artists, curators, and critics directed public opinion toward new topics that dealt with the representation of gender, sexuality, marginality, ethnicity, desire, and the body. These new concerns often led to tense relationships with local cultural bureaucracies, which often sought to safeguard “national values” and which regarded SCCAs’ cultural policy, generously financed from abroad, as a threat to local heritage. These cultural contradictions resembled, to some extent, the negotiating factions and parties in the political and economic spheres. Exclusive support for the latest artistic media or for themes and issues that had not been traditionally part of local cultural discourse often led to Luddite responses and to *rappels à l’ordre*, calls from artists to turn back toward a new academism or classicism or to an authentic national religious art (as was the case with such movements of the nineties as the St. Petersburg-based New Academism or the Romanian Neo-Byzantines).

Critics of the SCCAs often asked, as did the Romanian art historian Erwin Kessler: “What is the main task of the Soros Centers for

Contemporary Art—to detect and sustain artists, indifferently of the genres and the techniques in which they choose to express themselves, or to reformulate the current aesthetics and to re-dimension it according to some (imported) ‘standards’ that are in use in the contemporary world?”<sup>7</sup> Many would agree that the answer is in fact stated in the second half of this question, for most of the SCCAs, especially in their initial phase, directed their main efforts and resources toward promoting contemporary art, which at that time was primarily recognized according to such new genres, techniques, and forms of expression as installation, performance, video, and computer art. The centers’ activities aimed at a rapid modernization of the arts, resembling in this regard similar processes taking place in other fields (from banking to commerce and agriculture)—processes that may be accurately described, to [evoke] Jürgen Habermas’s understanding of transition, as ones of “retrieval” and of “catching up” with the West.

This was especially evident in the annual exhibitions organized by many Soros Centers, where the contemporary art shown in the gallery simultaneously introduced the spectator to the art of performance and installation as well as to the latest products of Western consumer electronics, communications, and information technologies. Contemporary Eastern European curators and artists worshiped the new media and communication technologies, regarding them as democratizing tools, much in the same way as the Western radical countercultural movements had seen revolutionary potential in new technologies decades earlier. In their prefaces to annual exhibition catalogs, SCCA directors and curators wrote of an urgent need to change the artistic status quo, of the need to modernize the language of art; in doing so they expressed faith in the emancipatory power of the new media and communication technologies. For example, “[the exhibition] 01010101 . . . [uses] new media with no consideration for its impact on the traditional culture,” “the new media are the solution for the internal crisis in Romanian art,” and “We cannot afford to keep the fifty-year distance from the Western model, so we must hurry up and catch up.”<sup>8</sup>

Although the Soros Centers shared similar objectives, acting according to a set of common principles recommended by an international

6 — For a more detailed discussion of the differences between the SCCA and the Artists’ Unions, see also Octavian Eganu, “What Was Contemporary Art?,” *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5–28. For a discussion of similar contradictions—namely, in interactions between artists and managers—and within a Western context, see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007); and Eve Chiapello, *Artistes versus managers: Le management culturel face à la critique artiste* (Paris: Métailié, 1998).

7 — Erwin Kessler, *Cearta* (Bucharest: Nemira, 1997), 123.

8 — Excerpts from preface by Călin Dan in *01010101 . . . Exhibition Catalogue of the 2nd Annual Exhibition of SCCA, Bucharest* (1994).

board of Western experts assembled by the New York office, they often differed with regard to local cultural particularities and even matters of direction, style, or medium in contemporary art.

*Some foundations preferred the logic of minimalism (albeit by now a richly inflected, resonantly remodernising kind) in both the artists whom they supported and the mode of their operations, whereas other foundations were seeking to match their approaches to the multivalent, diverse and dispersive spirit of more contemporary art. While the former was well advanced, and probably perfected at Dia:Beacon, the latter was very much a work in progress.*<sup>9</sup>

As SCCA international board member Lynn Cooke suggests above, it was not only that the centers expressed a preference for artists who worked in a particular manner, but even that certain managerial approaches employed by a director and the staff could be understood in terms of favoring a particular Western artistic style. Of course, the choice of any modernist, minimalist, or multivalent contemporary style of art management or support was entirely dependent upon the specialization or interest of the director, upon the tastes of the coordinators, or the professional interests and fields of expertise of the board members.

By the late nineties, which corresponds to the final phase of the SCCA network, its board and executive members became more critical of the role and aims of their institutions. They raised a series of problematic issues, including that of the unequal character of the dialogue between Western and Eastern European cultural representatives, a dialogue often dominated by a patronizing attitude on the part of the Westerners. Some directors questioned and sought to redefine the role of the institution of contemporary art in society, launching projects that addressed the necessity of publishing more critical and extensive material and educating the public on the history of contemporary art and its role in society.<sup>10</sup> Toward the end of the nineties the Open Society Institute proceeded gradually to reduce funding for this program.

Individual SCCAs were advised to register as independent NGOs and to search for alternative sources of financing.<sup>11</sup> In 1999, members of the SCCA network created the International Contemporary Art Network (ICAN), which was launched for collaborative but also, and most importantly, for fundraising purposes, but their efforts to establish themselves as self-sustainable institutions have not met with significant success. To date only a few of these centers maintain even a low level of activity within their local cultural contexts.

What was the overall impact of this program on the local scenes? It can be argued that the SCCA model has affected the fine or the visual arts in the same way in which other mechanisms of transition have changed the “rules of the game” in other social fields. Using an economic terminology, one can say that the effect can be understood in terms of liberalization or deregulation of this field of art. Here, I must insist on the term “liberalization” over “democratization,” given that the cultural policies promoted by the SCCA network have largely stimulated liberal or individualistic principles rather than aiming to attain more egalitarian ends among practitioners of both new and traditional, contemporary and fine arts. While on the artistic or aesthetic level, the SCCA removed barriers that stood in the way of artistic innovation, bringing the ethos of individual autonomy and individual expression from out of its former “unofficial” status under socialism, on the administrative level it shattered the belief that the state had to be the sole patron, commissioner, supporter, and judge of the artist. The program devoted substantial material and human resources to delegate some of these functions to other social players and, above all, to various players within the neoliberal market. They carried out these transformations by positioning themselves in a certain tacit opposition to existing socialist artists’ organizations, and as a result—over recent decades—Artists’ Unions in particular have lost their previous role as the sole representatives of the interests of artists. Indeed, the unions came to be regarded by many as outdated, unnecessarily rigid vestiges of totalitarianism, as an organizational model of the closed society, as a model that was too repressive and authoritarian, too collectivist or “tribal,” to be entrusted with the protection

9 — Lynn Cooke, who served on the international board of the SCCA network, quoted in Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art + Philanthropy: Public Spaces/Private Funding* (Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press, 2007), 16.

10 — See, for instance, Alenka Pirman, *Research & Education in Contemporary Art in Eastern and Central Europe: On Initiation, Development, and Implementation of a Network Program 1998–2000* (Ljubljana: Open Society Institute Slovenia, 2000).

11 — “Each SCCA should fundraise 25% of non-Soros money in order to gain the other 25% of its 1998 budget from its National OSI, with the deadline of 1 July 1999.” SCCA-Zagreb Strategy and Business Plan 2000–2003, at <http://snap.archivum.ws/>.

of individual freedom of expression and creative liberties. The postsocialist new institutional model "center for contemporary art" was to differ in every respect from the socialist model; it was inspired by what Popper called the "impersonal institution."<sup>12</sup> Like other liberal thinkers, Popper distrusts strong personalities, seeing in them future tyrants and dictators. This view stood in opposition to that of Plato, who believed that in the state the stronger must rule the weaker, and of Hegel, who saw world history as shaped by so-called "world historical individuals." Instead Popper believes in well-designed *impersonal* institutions, in well-adjusted, well-maintained, and constantly improved institutional mechanisms led by professional managers—a view held also by his friend Friedrich Hayek, who, drawing on Adam Smith's "invisible hand," saw in the institutional impersonalism of the market a social panacea.<sup>13</sup>

The SCCA program offered an early prototype of this type of capitalist impersonal institution, and ever since the SCCA program broke the ice in the early nineties, multiple impersonal mechanisms have come to represent the interests of postsocialist artists. They differ from the lingering Artists' Unions in many crucial ways. Instead of providing a full range of conditions—both a livelihood and means of creation—as did the unions (but of course at the expense of imposing censorship or restraints over individual expression—the new model encourages absolute freedom but provides only the "outward preconditions,"<sup>14</sup> in the form of grants or investments, to a limited number of artists; and, instead of relying on the state to support the large masses of artists, the new direction in cultural management seeks to develop a market-economics-ready culture that would secure both government and corporate funding, to be redistributed to the most unique and successful artists. In the transformations

carried out under the label "for contemporary art" one finds reflected some of the key theses of the discourse of transition, theses consistent with neoliberal rationality, which since the collapse of the Berlin Wall has assumed a hegemonic role in the postsocialist ideological vacuum. The field of cultural production, like other social fields, has been submitted to an economic rationality; it has been liberalized and deregulated and made to function in accordance with the rules of the market. One of the many forms of critique to which the SCCAs had to answer during their decade of activities was that they did not engage a larger number of artists; they were often accused of being an elite club who served only a limited number of artists.<sup>15</sup> Of course their mission to support the most innovative and radical forms of art could not have drawn large masses of artists, for artistic innovation or, rather, the ethos of the avant-garde that inspired the activities of these centers, is very individual and therefore much more restricted. Of course, the SCCAs did not operate with the same budgets as did the state-funded Artists' Unions during socialism, and could not offer apartments or vacation tickets to their artists. But even on an ideological level they were not expected to do so. In the capitalist open society based on harsh competition, or in a society built in accordance with neoliberal political and economic rationality according to which the entire society is conceived as consisting of enterprise units (the person, the family, the group, the community), economic interests must always prevail.<sup>16</sup> A center for contemporary art—as the name "center" itself suggests—was not predestined to support the masses or to address the concerns of all artists, as the word "union" would imply. Its main donee and privileged beneficiary is that sector of the elite regarded as the sole agent of change within the Western discourse of transition.

In Eastern Europe, transitology has not yet been scrutinized with the same rigor as it was in other transitional areas of the world. In some countries of Latin America, where the "transition to democracy" and to the free market were performed by military juntas during the seventies, local intellectuals have frequently employed the concept of transition

12 — Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 126, 360.

13 — On impersonal institutions, see Popper's *Open Society* and Jeremy Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 53.

14 — The expression "outward preconditions" comes from Ludwig von Mises's best-known book, *Liberalism* (1927). Here is what he writes: "It is not from a disdain of spiritual goods that liberalism concerns itself exclusively with man's material well-being, but from a conviction that what is highest and deepest in man cannot be touched by any outward regulation.

[Liberalism] seeks to produce outer well-being because it knows that inner, spiritual riches cannot come to man from without, but only from within his own heart. It does not aim at creating anything but the outward preconditions for the development of the inner life." Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: The Classical Tradition* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005). For a more detailed discussion of these "outward preconditions," see Octavian Eșanu, "On Artivism (In Between Culture and Politics)," in *Umelec International*, vol. 15 (2-2011).

15 — I rely here on a document produced by the Open Society Institute for internal circulation. See Larisa Muravska, "Assessment/Mapping of Activities of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts" (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2002).

16 — Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

to analyze recent social transformations as well as to examine various cultural processes and artistic practices. In Chile, for example, sociologists, philosophers, artists, and art critics have often addressed Pinochet's "transition to democracy" and the implementation of the free market. Tomás Moulian describes these traumatic historical events in terms of a capitalist counterrevolution that was called upon to perform a radical modernization. Willy Thayer, on the other hand, has brought the discussion of transition to the field of culture, suggesting that under the banner of transition to democracy the military junta enforced a critique of representation, carrying out a radical assault on the established codes of signification—a task that was once accomplished by the radical artistic avant-garde.<sup>17</sup> To rephrase Thayer's argument using the vocabulary of the Russian avant-garde: in Chile it was the military junta and not the artists who performed the descent to the "zero degree of form" or the radical *sdvig* of meaning (*smyslovoi sdvig*) on the political and economic levels. This is one way of understanding the art of transition. Discussing the art of transition in the countries of the Southern Cone (Chile and Argentina), Francine Masiello writes: "The art of transition thus evolves from duality and movement; a transition in political strategy from dictatorship to neoliberal democracy; a transition in cultural practices from a focus on social class alone to matters of sexuality and gender; a transition in styles of representation that weave between modernist

yearning and postmodernist pastiche."<sup>18</sup> This passage not only suggests that the art of transition may not be necessarily bounded only by the geographical or the temporal but also that it may be regarded as a force field that emerges in between certain conflicting limits, betrayed by such spatial-temporal constructions as "before and after"—formulas that belong to the trope of transition.

In Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet republics, where the transition to new cultural models, codes, and forms of representation was relatively smooth and steady, the artists and critics have been less enthusiastic about beginning a critical appraisal of the broader mechanisms involved in these socioeconomic and cultural transformations. Despite significant differences in how the transition to liberal democracy unfolded in Eastern Europe and in other transitional regions of the world, much evidence suggests similarities and parallels. One could even state that what today goes by the name of "contemporary art" in the countries that have been traditionally considered at the peripheries of the "First World" cannot be understood separately from transitology—a discourse and a vehicle through which Western, and in particular American, postwar private and governmental agents, have projected economic, political, but also cultural and artistic values to the "rest" of the world.

Excerpted from *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group before and after 1989*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013.

17 — See Tomás Moulian, *Chile Actual: Anatomía de un Mito, Colección sin norte* (Santiago, Chile: ARCIS Universidad, LOM Ediciones, 1997). Willy Thayer, "El golpe como consumación de la vanguardia," *Extremoccidente* no. 2 (2003): 54–58.

18 — Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 3.

## Geographically Defined Exhibitions: The Balkans, Between Eastern Europe and the New Europe

RALUCA VOINEA

Slobodan Milošević is dead. After five years of investigations, gathering evidence and listening to witnesses, the tribunal at The Hague missed the opportunity of convicting "the butcher of the Balkans" for crimes against

humanity. While following the European news coverage of the Balkans or Southeast Europe, describing its ever-changing boundaries, namings or belongings, one realises that the first sentence of this text is among the very few

things that represent a certainty. One recalls the image Westerners had of the Balkans at the beginning of the twentieth century:

*They found its geography too complicated, its ethnography too confused, its history too intricate and its politics too inexplicable. Although there were plenty of books dealing with these matters, each year that passed made room for more, as the situation continually changed, always introducing something new to record, a new subject to depict, a new problem to explain, a new complication to disentangle.<sup>1</sup>*

Not much seems to have changed, and the image of instability continues to be projected on the countries of (South) Eastern Europe, even if it is an image originating in Brussels. Milošević's death allowed European Union ministers to reaffirm Serbia's "EU destiny." One month later, they were not so sure, as the Serbian government failed to hand over to the same Hague tribunal the former military leader Ratko Mladić. Independently of their decision, Montenegro, a province that is already using the euro as an accepted currency, decided (21 May 2006) on its own separation from Serbia through a referendum, opening up the possibility of joining the EU before Serbia. Whatever was left of the former Republic of Yugoslavia was relegated to the past.

In addition, the date for Romania and Bulgaria to join the European Union was likely to be postponed from 1 January 2007. These two countries are considered as separate cases in spite of both having signed the preliminary treaty at the same time and having followed the steps imposed by the EU. The prospect of this decision prompted a vexed reaction from the Bulgarian prime minister: "We are not second-class Europeans. Do not try to humiliate us!"<sup>2</sup>

January 2007 was due to coincide with Slovenia's and Estonia's promotion to the euro-zone. The ten Central European countries that joined the EU in 2004 seem to be behaving well, and their acceptance did not prove to be as problematic as the eurosceptics had feared. However, the officials who gathered in Salzburg in March 2006 to discuss future enlargement [of the EU] invoked the limited "absorption capacity" of the European family. Two months later, the International Commission on the Balkans elaborated the Rome Declaration, saying that:

*The Salzburg meeting conveyed the message that the EU is neither ready nor willing to offer credible membership perspectives. We can only regret this unfortunate development. It is in the Balkans that the EU must show that it has the power to transform weak states and divided societies. This is imperative for the Balkans, but no less so for the EU. Unless the EU adopts a bold accession strategy which integrates all Balkan countries into the Union within the next decade, it will remain mired as a reluctant colonial power at enormous cost in places like Kosovo, Bosnia and even Macedonia. The real referendum on the EU's future will take place in the Balkans.<sup>3</sup>*

Yet again, the future of Europe seems to be in the Balkans. And indeed, with the prospect of all the other countries in Southeast Europe, up to and including Turkey, joining in the following decade, the EU will have to reconsider not only its absorption capacity but, in the end, its very nature and mission. Officials from the EU Finnish presidency, current at the time of writing, while discussing the possibility of Armenia and Georgia joining the EU, describe a set of abstract values to be followed rather than a set of criteria and obligations that determines inclusions and exclusions, saying: "It's semantics. You can ponder whether the aspirations refer to EU membership or European values in the metaphysical sense."<sup>4</sup> However, EU interest in the region is far from metaphysical, especially when discussing the profits of Western companies in the new Eastern markets or the potential threat of highly skilled workers coming to take jobs in the West. It is certainly not just a question of semantics either when one refers to an otherwise not very clearly defined space as "the Balkans" or "Southeastern Europe," and it is not only a question of geography either.

To what extent do geographical exhibitions of contemporary art taking place in Western Europe address these questions? Do they aim to deconstruct the semantics or merely to reproduce them? Is the curators' desire to give public exposure to artists who are not known and to raise awareness of the creative energies that exist outside the Western scene enough to compensate for the geographical-ideological frames within which they are presented? Does the frame come with the funding that is left behind [after] assembling the exhibition? Or is

1 — Božidar Jezernik, *Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers*, SAQ1 in association with The Bosnian Institute, London, 2004, pp. 26–27.

2 — Associated Press in Sofia, quoted on euobserver.com.

3 — [Available at <http://www.esiweb.org> — Ed.]

4 — Available at <http://euobserver.com/9/22183>



it dismantled in an attempt to change the discourse and to challenge expectations?

In the case of exhibitions about Eastern Europe—whichever part of it they refer to—there is at least one positive consequence, which shows the need for a more concerted local response and agency. After a long process of dealing with their own image, as seen through the eyes of the West, and basically reinventing this image for themselves, professionals in the East have increasingly begun to assume their roles locally and to organise the structures that would help them to dislocate their constructed histories and replace them with their own syntheses. As Boris Groys wrote in 2001:

*But it would be neither wise nor fair to demand of Western art institutions that they perform a task which instead is actually the duty of Eastern European artists, curators and art critics: to reflect upon the specific context of contemporary art in Eastern Europe through its own art. Those who refuse to contextualise themselves will be implanted into a context by someone else and then run the risk of no longer recognising themselves.*<sup>5</sup>

This seems to be happening extensively today, although one can ask oneself pragmatically if this is also the result of the respective societies taking the path of a developing economy, of a relatively stable political situation, or even of conditions and funding coming from the West precisely in order to “stimulate” local reflection. Whatever the case, the series of large and ambitious projects dedicated to this region after 1990 was more than just a way to satisfy the need for surveying a so-called unmapped territory. They represented a necessary step of self-redefinition: a geographical one (where was the East and of what did it consist?) and a historical one (what were the historical legacies that shaped it—as a region and as individual divisions—and which part of this history needed (or still needs) to be rewritten, according to which criteria, or whose criteria?).

In his text for the catalogue *Manifesta 2* [1998], Robert Fleck identified the wide and frantic exposure of artists from Eastern Europe in the West after the revolutions of 1989 as a wave that lasted until 1992. It was followed by other waves of fashion in contemporary art, such as the British and Scandinavian ones, and by the constitution of *Manifesta* as an institutional

enterprise to project a borderless Europe. The assumption was that the East had by then left behind the communist past and internalised the differences in its art production that this past might have produced. About six years later, analysing the project of European enlargement as the ultimate stage of Western Europe’s “heroic endeavour to cope with countless differences . . . through the relation to the Other of Europe, the Other of its communist past, the East, its cultural, religious, underdeveloped, backward, belated Other,” Boris Buden identifies the ideological background against which we can understand the “unexpected and curious” rise of interest in Balkan art.<sup>6</sup> This interest manifested for example in the exhibitions *In Search of Balkania*, *Blood and Honey* and *In the Gorges of the Balkans*.<sup>7</sup>

Both the “fashionable wave” at the beginning of the 1990s and the “sudden” interest in the Balkans at the beginning of 2000 can be connected to political events and the funding subsequently made available for such projects. However, were they only that—the consequence of an official focus on a certain region, with a cultural programme resulting from this interest—they would have indeed remained a wave and a curiosity. This is precisely the ideology that Buden talks about, the ideology that “affects again today’s political reality”<sup>8</sup> and links the two moments to which he and Robert Fleck refer. It is not only that artists from that part of Europe keep being discovered and rediscovered, but that there is also an apparently inexhaustible desire to present them in “Eastern art” frames.

Big historical surveys like *Europa, Europa: Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa* (*Europa, Europa: A Hundred Years of the Avant-Garde in Central and Eastern Europe*, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, 1994) and *Aspekte/Positionen: 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa, 1949–1999* (*Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe, 1949–1999*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 1999), or half-geographical and half-thematic exhibitions like *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1999) and *L’Autre*

6 — Boris Buden, “The Revolution of 1989: The Past of Yet Another Illusion,” in *The Manifesta Decade*, eds. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipović, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005.

7 — *In Search of Balkania*, Neue Galerie Graz, 2002; *Blood and Honey*, Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg, Austria, 2003; and *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, 2003.

8 — Buden, op. cit.

5 — Boris Groys, “Back from the Future,” in 2000+ *ArtEast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe*, Orangerie Congress Innsbruck, 2001.

moitié de l'Europe (*The Other Side of Europe*, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 2000), dealt more or less with the concept of Eastern Europe as the legacy of the Yalta agreement. Whether presenting the East as the other, lost half of what was in essence one piece, and trying to show that Eastern artists are still able to speak the "universal" language (i.e., the Western one) of modern and contemporary art, or by aspiring to show the differences, the strategies and vocabularies developed during and after communism, through art-historical revisionism or the creation of new theoretical premises, these exhibitions should have represented important achievements that would enable curators to move a step forward from divisions that were obsolete and ideologies that needed many historical and analytical approaches rather than homogenising big blockbuster exhibitions.

Instead, at the beginning of 2000, another spectre was resuscitated and came to replace the general East with the more specific and more problematic *Balkans*. If being associated with the former or post-communist/socialist/Titoist East was something that more or less all the countries from that part of Europe had to go through, as a process accompanying their passage to the status of capitalist societies, whether they liked it or not, the new label of Balkan that came to be attached to countries that until then had been part of Eastern and even Central Europe was much more violently rejected.

The Balkans, far from being only a neutral geographical or historical denomination, from the end of the nineteenth century began to carry "the negative connotations of filth, passivity, untrustworthiness, disregard for women, conspiracy, unscrupulousness, opportunism, indolence, superstition, sluggishness, unprincipled and overzealous bureaucracy, and so on."<sup>9</sup> The wars in Yugoslavia, unjustly generalised as the "Balkan Wars," have nevertheless generated a Balkan crisis. The region suddenly came to be perceived as a threat to the security of its Western neighbours, and it brought back to the surface a concept that apparently had faded during communism. Unlike "the former East," the Balkans had never been fully accepted as part of Europe but always confined to its margins, somewhere close to the Orient. "In the region itself the Balkans are always thought to be elsewhere, to the south-east of wherever one is," the author Vesna Goldsworthy writes,<sup>10</sup> and

thus a process of Balkanisation became equivalent to an identification with the Other or, even worse, with the dark side of an incomplete self.

Erhard Busek, the Austrian politician heading the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, recognised that in order to change the attitude towards the Balkans that sees it as a region of permanent instability, one has to start by changing the name: "We need to say farewell to the term 'Balkans' and call this part of the continent 'southeast Europe.' Why is that? The term 'Balkans' is associated with a psychological note of condescension which most certainly affects the people thus denominated."<sup>11</sup> Despite his paternalistic tone, Busek openly admits that the reason for integrating the Balkans is primarily one in the interests of the EU itself—not only to make sure that "the war in the backyard" does not reach "Europe" but also to recuperate the region that was always considered a fundamental part of Europe, and which Churchill was proud of, having saved it, namely Greece, the cradle of European civilisation itself, from the Soviet influence in 1945: "Europe bears full responsibility for southeast Europe. The EU needs to realise that closing the gap between us and Greece is a prime task, for there is no other way of truly integrating the Greeks, and without the prospect of enlargement the region will hardly gain stability."<sup>12</sup> With the rise of Balkan art exhibitions in the late 1990s, the discourse changed from the more specific condition of postcommunism to the more general condition of the "Other." Geographically these exhibitions also brought to attention countries like Greece and Turkey that had not found a place in any of the previous Eastern shows, and gave a particular focus on the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania.

More than in the case of other Eastern European shows, the focus on the Balkans was not merely geographical but directly addressed the Balkans as a mental construct. Even if it was not older than the construct of Eastern Europe,<sup>13</sup> and in great parts it coincided with it,

11 — Erhard Busek, "Austria and the Balkans," in *Blut und Honig: Zukunft ist am Balkan (Blood and Honey: The Future's in the Balkans)*, Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg, Austria, 2003.

12 — Ibid.

13 — As Larry Wolff demonstrates in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe*, the West/East pair as representing the difference between civilisation/barbarism in the eighteenth century replaced the polarisation that had existed until then between South/North. According to Wolff, it was this older set of cultural prejudices and not only the economic disparity between the West and the East that made the shadows persist even when the Iron Curtain was gone. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1994.

9 — Jezernik, op. cit., p. 26.

10 — Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1998, p. ix.

the construct of the Balkans nevertheless had a stronger impact and touched the most sensitive chord of Western Europe's cultural (i.e., ethnic and religious) identity. The choice to deconstruct the Balkan(ist) clichés or to reinforce them was obviously a curatorial decision, and the exhibitions *Blood and Honey* and *In the Gorges of the Balkans* represent two possible models of expressing this decision.

The paradoxical Balkans as a place of permanent change (making the attempt to capture its features an impossible task) and at the same time as a place where history is suspended and the relationships between people have an essential character (in the sense of both archaic and universal) seems to have been the starting point for Harald Szeemann when approaching the Balkans for the making of the exhibition *Blood and Honey: The Future's in the Balkans*. With the declared aim of raising Western interest in the region, as opposed to "displaying exotica," Szeemann created an unambiguous frame through which the region was to be discovered—between "the poles of anger and tenderness, disaster and idyll," therefore *ab initio* a place of contradictions: a place where one can find all these "multilingual ethnicities and religions, majorities and minorities" and at the same time where people attach a lot of importance "to being represented as nations"; a place where the future of the Balkans lies and where one can at the same time be transported to the past. While this swinging between past and future could have been an interesting context in which to place the contemporary works of artists from the region, in the exhibition Szeemann assembled the past rather selectively, and the image of the future was delegated to the public. By focusing on works that had an explicit connection to violence, war, or to the extreme opposite (loud music, weddings, etc.), and bringing historical elements to the configuration of the landscape, such as the series of sculptures from the National Gallery of Tirana grouped together as *Homo socialisticus* or the hearse of Franz Ferdinand (recollecting the image of Sarajevo as the place where the First World War started), the installation was set to correspond to an image the public would recognise immediately. The use of such devices was not unusual for Szeemann, nor was the interest in geographical representation, despite the fact that the other exhibitions he identified as part of the same series (*Visionary Switzerland*, 1991; *Austria in a Lacework of Roses*, 1996; *Beware of Leaving Your Dreams, You Might Find Yourself*

*in the Dream of Others: 100 Years of Art in Poland*, 2001; and the last one, *Visionary Belgium*, 2005) were always about a single country and not an entire region. More problematic is the question of what he was ultimately trying to achieve through such framings, which was "to give shape to the spirituality of a region, of a country and its inhabitants."<sup>14</sup> Whether one uses spirituality as a metaphor or the other "abused mythologeme" of mentality,<sup>15</sup> in the effort to find a collective generic attribute with which to balance the lack of thorough analysis, because this can prove to "be too difficult or time-consuming," the result is the same: the inevitable stereotypical traps, which Macedonian curator Suzana Milevska admitted were embedded in the "honey and blood" pairing, in "its etymological and mythical weight and its dichotomized structure."<sup>16</sup>

While Harald Szeemann based his selection on the recommendations of curators and artists in each country, his preconceived image of the Balkans was more powerful and pigeonholed the realities he found "in the field," not least because his own aura created certain expectations of the people he met, and it is not unlikely that they delivered to him the image he was looking for.<sup>17</sup> René Block, the other very well-known curator who approached the region

14 — Harald Szeemann, 'On the Exhibition,' in *Blut und Honig*, op. cit.

15 — Maria Todorova, "Introduction: Learning Memory, Remembering Identity," in *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, ed. Maria Todorova, Hurst & Co., London, 2004, p. 5.

16 — Milevska herself actually first put forth the concept of an exhibition with the title *Honey and Blood*, starting from the etymology of the word "Balkan," which comes from the Turkish *bal* ("honey") and *kan* ("blood") and refers to the region encountered by the Ottoman soldiers, which surprised them as warm and welcoming in the summer but with very harsh winters. Suzana Milevska, "The Apparent Charm of the Balkans: Some Background Information on the Project 'Honey and Blood,'" *Artelier*, 8/2003, MNAC & ICCA Bucharest, Romania.

17 — In analysing the Western reception of the situation in Bosnia during the war as a typical manifestation of the Western gaze, which wants to see in the Balkans the perpetual victim, Slavoj Žižek tells the story of "an anthropological expedition trying to contact a wild tribe in the New Zealand jungle who allegedly danced a terrible war dance in grotesque death-masks. When they reached the tribe in the evening, they asked them to dance it for them, and the dance performed the next morning did in fact match the description. Satisfied, the expedition returned to civilisation and wrote a much-praised report on the savage rites of the primitives. Shortly afterwards, however, when another expedition reached this tribe and learned to speak their language properly, it was shown that this terrible dance did not exist in itself at all: in their discussions with the first group of explorers, the aborigines somehow guessed what the strangers wanted and quickly, in the night following their arrival, invented it especially for them, to satisfy their demand . . . In short, the explorers received their own message back from the aborigines in its inverted, true form." Slavoj Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*, Verso, London, 1994, p. 213. The relationship between artists and curators cannot be compared to that between anthropologists and a tribe; however, the story can provide interesting reflection on the sometimes perverse and manipulative nature of this relationship.

# IN DEN

# SCHLUCHTEN

# DES BALKAN



René Block, ed. *In den Schluchten des Balkan (In the Gorges of the Balkans)*.

Exhibition catalogue. Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridericianum, 2003. Cover design by atelier grotesk, Kassel, featuring detail of Aydan Murtezaoglu's photograph *ISIMSIZ* (2000). Courtesy Block Berlin

in the same year, 2003, gave a more nuanced understanding, first of all by moving away from an authorial position to the position of a reporter who always mediates his account through the voices of the local professionals. The show in Kassel was, for Block, just a part of a bigger project titled *The Balkan Trilogy*, which took place during the course of a year (2003–04). The debut of the trilogy, the exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report*, was founded on his knowledge of the region since 1995, when he was the organiser of the Istanbul Biennial. The exhibition was also intended as a reference to its location in Kassel, as a way of pointing to (or compensating for) the relative absence of Eastern European artists in all previous Documenta exhibitions.

The second part of the trilogy consisted of a series of independent projects organised by the partners represented in the exhibition “in the cities of the Balkans” themselves, for which Block delegated the decisions to local curators. Taking different forms—conferences, publications, exhibitions, biennials—in Istanbul, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Sofia, Belgrade and up to the Kurdish town of Diyarbakir, the projects not only gave the local curators the possibility of organising something that was particularly relevant for their context but also fostered relationships between those places that are by no means as connected as the Western perception would suggest. The trilogy ended in Kassel again, with a historic retrospective of the Croatian artist Mangelos—as an acknowledgement of his influential role among the artists in the former Yugoslavia—and with a site-specific project developed by the Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč.

*In the Gorges of the Balkans* was a title Block borrowed from Karl May’s *Oriental Odyssey*, but the project itself deconstructed the German novelist’s prejudiced approach towards a place to which he never travelled. That is why not only embarking himself on a journey through

the Balkans but also facilitating all these projects to develop there was the way for the curator to stress in the first place that perceptions of the region can start to change in the region itself.

We go back and keep talking about these exhibitions because the EU and enlargement still make the subject relevant for more than just historical interest, since, although the “Balkan” wars are over and the “Other” is now moving farther East, the EU still decides, as in a sort of über-school, who will pass the grade and become first-class Europeans. As it happens, under different names (such as “the new Europe”), these exhibitions continue to be organised, predominantly in the West, and few of them redraw the mental maps of the region they frame. This, however, might not be possible as a unilateral process, and it would require a revision of the hierarchies and (art) histories of the West itself. As the curator Maria Hlavajova points out, the East cannot really be considered as the “former East” unless this challenges “the West to rearticulate itself, despite its economic superiority, as the ‘former West.’”

The task would then be to find ways of overcoming the asymmetry residing in the chronic debris of post–Cold War divisions in Europe. This cannot happen by repressing the differences, or by absorbing them into the Western narrative, but rather by constant dynamic remixing of changing aesthetic, cultural and political positions in Europe, itself in flux.<sup>18</sup>

But this is a task for other exhibitions to assume—it is the curators’ choice not to confine them geographically.

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18 — Maria Hlavajova, “Towards the Normal: Negotiating the ‘Former East,’” in *The Manifesta Decade*, op. cit.

# Comrades-in-Arms, Accomplices, Companions: Collaborative Trends in Lithuanian Contemporary Art

LINA MICHELKEVIČĖ

## Introduction: 1990s Collectivism

Shortly after the restoration of Lithuania's independence, artists embraced systematic and organised collaboration as a vitally important strategy for adapting to the changed cultural situation and making use of newly available ways of expression. On the one hand, the new state of affairs prompted them to look for new modes of "survival"—i.e., to create artist-run organisations in order to facilitate the search for sources of financing and exhibition activity (for instance, *Metastudija*, initiated in 1994, later became the Lithuanian Interdisciplinary Artists' Association; *Jutempus*, a space for interdisciplinary art projects, was active from 1993 to 1997). On the other hand, it paved the way for new forms of creative work that would have been deemed inappropriate in the Soviet art context.

The general public's increased need for communion and participation in historic events (e.g., mass political movements like *The Baltic Way*, *Sąjūdis* rallies, and large gatherings near buildings important to the nation like the TV tower, the Press Palace, and the Parliament, etc.) also encouraged artists to organise into groups and engage in collective work. In the period between 1989 and 1997, as many as 24 official artist groups were active in Lithuania, with around 200 people involved in their activities.<sup>1</sup> Some of them, primarily those brought together by shared creative objectives and a more or less common identity rather than the need for survival (*Žalias lapas* [Green Leaf], *Post Ars*, *Naujosios komunikacijos mokykla* [The School of New Communication], and *Akademinių pasiruošimo grupė* [Academic Training Group]), acted as a particular catalyst for Lithuanian contemporary art discourse—not so much through the overall result of their artistic activity, but rather through their effort to reform the content and especially the form of the traditional art discourse.

Although the 1990s were characterised by attempts to implement the postmodern

paradigm in Lithuanian art, the artist collectives mentioned above had performed a rather modernist function—that of triggering "social, political and technological progress."<sup>2</sup> These were artists as comrades-in-arms, brought together by faith in the power of art (expressed most radically in the slogan of the *Redas Diržys*-organised actions *Tiesė. Pjūvis* [Straight. Section] and, later, the *Alytus Art Biennial: Los Artistas Unidos Jamás Serán Vencidos* [Nobody Will Ever Defeat the United Artists]) and attempts to overturn the stagnant tradition of art and shock the public (think *Post Ars*'s actions here). Although they never managed to develop such a clear identity and tradition of collaboration as Western art collectives had (the likes of *Art & Language* and *Group Material*), these Lithuanian groups were distinguished by the fact that they based their activity on collaboration—the search for consensus—rather than cooperation, the use of different skills.

The young capitalist state went through the long and slow course of development of the Western world in one decade. At the same time, although *Alfonsas Andriuskevičius* was the first critic to identify group creative work, which had been shunned before the Revival, as the new norm of artistic activity in his text for the catalogue of the Contemporary Art Centre's 1990s review exhibition of *Lithuanian Art 1989–1999: The Ten Years* (1999), the end of the previous century's last decade also marked the decline of artistic collectivism in Lithuania. Long-lasting collaboration became predominantly the prerogative of a few established artist couples, while single ex-members of various groups were now taking to the international scene.

## The Changing Concept of Collaborative Work

Despite the collectivist euphoria that had marked the birth of Lithuanian contemporary art, the concepts of collaboration and parti-

1 — Rasa Andriušytė, "Dailės grupuotės—organizacinio meno gyvinimo naujovė," in *Lietuvos dailės kaita 1990–1996: institucinis aspektas*, International Association of Art Critics/Lithuanian Section, 1997, p. 55.

2 — Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds., "Introduction: Periodizing Collectivism," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 5.

cipation did not enter the vocabularies of art critics and the artists themselves until the beginning of the current century. It is difficult to say whether it was due to the “depreciation” of virtually all communion-related concepts caused by the infamous Soviet communes, collective farms, co-ops, and collectivism<sup>3</sup> or, insufficient awareness of Western art discourse and lack of appropriate linguistic tools. In fact, the discussion of collaboration also only gained momentum in Western art criticism at the end of the 1990s, after the appearance of genre-defining studies and exhibitions<sup>4</sup> (which, curiously enough, often looked back at the “classical” period of contemporary art—the 1960s–1980s).

Nevertheless, the definition of “collaboration” and “participation” that Lithuanian art critics and curators had embraced a good decade earlier hardly applied to the “collectivisation” practiced by 1990s artists. Long-term artist organisations focused on co-authorship had already fallen out of fashion, while the figure who was now bringing the artists together in a common context was the curator. Many collaborative initiatives took the temporary form of a one-off exhibition or, even more often, that of a project. Artists as colleagues were replaced by “accomplices”—the audience that would willingly or unknowingly make the birth of a work of art possible—or different preexisting and newly initiated social communities (used as “artistic material,” according to Alfonsas Andriuskevičius).<sup>5</sup> It needs to be said, though, that these accomplices did not collaborate so much as they “participated” or became “involved”; the latter terms enabled artists and curators to question the notion of authorship, discreetly distinguishing between those who have to remain anonymous participants and those who have to bear the burden of authorship.

Yet the question of authorship also began to appear old-fashioned when we finally had an opportunity to read the Lithuanian translation of *The Open Work* by Umberto Eco in 2004,

when it was almost half a century old, and rejected the naive conviction that other participants’ physical involvement in a work or process of art unbalanced the author’s position more than the mental act of interpretation. For contemporary Lithuanian artists and curators, collaboration became a creative strategy that enabled the search for new *curatorial models*, a study of *society as a conglomerate of diverse communities*, and, finally, *coordination of different competencies and skills* facilitating the attainment of artistic (as well as social and political) objectives.

### Curated Coexistence

The stimulation of collaboration as a way of unbalancing the traditional exhibition/art-event format was favoured by the first generation of Lithuanian curators; it was particularly prominent in the projects (co-)curated by Raimundas Malašauskas. It is evident, in the first place, that large-scale projects which take the form of events, workshops, talks, online websites, or even TV broadcasts, rather than the habitual exposition-based ones, require an entirely different circle of specialists in their realisation, and their success depends on much more intense and extensive public participation. Typically, collaboration, involvement, and participation are not only employed as one of a project’s fundamental conditions, but also consciously declared to be its principal objective. The concept of the exhibition 24/7: *Wilno–Nueva York (visą parą)* (CAC, 2003, curated by Kęstutis Kuizinas and Raimundas Malašauskas) almost seems to paraphrase Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea of the contemporary artist who is interested in the creation of microtopias—possible relations here and now—rather than tomorrow’s social utopias: “The 24/7 project did not aim to change the society, but rather intended to initiate the creation of purpose-led communities [. . .] The important element was not so much the art objects, but rather the formation of connections, directions and relationships.”<sup>6</sup> Speaking about the IX Baltic Triennial of International Art titled *BMW* (CAC, 2005, curated by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, Raimundas Malašauskas, and Alexis Vaillant), Raimundas Malašauskas emphasises the importance of collaboration between curators and artists,<sup>7</sup> while the presentation of the yet-nonexistent first

3 — See Gintautas Mažeikis, “Kolaboravimo ir konkurencijos mitai bei kooperacijos baimės,” in *Literatūra ir menas*, 25 May 2007.

4 — A few titles will suffice: Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 1998 (French edition), 2002 (English edition); Charles Green’s *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001; Grant Kester’s *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004; exhibition *Touch: Relational Art from the 1990s to Now* (curated by Nicolas Bourriaud), San Francisco Art Institute, 2002; etc.

5 — Alfonsas Andriuskevičius, “Meno medžiaga: nuo dožų iki automobilininkų,” in *Šiaurės Atėnai*, 22 May 2004.

6 — 24/7: *Wilno–Nueva York (visą parą)*, <http://cac.lt/lt/exhibitions/past/03/1468>.

7 — “BMW/Juodosios rinkos pasaulių strategijos: pastangos suprasti” (Dovilė Tumpytė in conversation with Raimundas Malašauskas), in *Kultūros barai*, no. 1, 2006, pp. 36–37.



episode of the CAC TV show (2004–07) is referred to as a “celebration of interaction.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, a consistent shift from collaborative curatorship to *curated collaboration and interaction* is evident. Suddenly it became obvious that it was sufficient to curate a sense of communion that was most easily attained by appropriating some everyday situation (e.g., cooking and eating in Raimundas Malašauskas’s collective dinners during the exhibition 24/7 and RAM6 workshop (Vilma, 2004) and the Workshow event series organised by PB8 [Andrius Rugys]). If before that the discussion of the issues of collaboration and participation had questioned artists’ and curators’ undisputed authorship rights (at least for a short while), at this point the latter figures emphatically reclaimed their former positions; they began curating the everyday itself, leaving it to those interacting and participating to worry about a project’s content or success. Dorinel Marc vividly described this high tide of authorship, calling Malašauskas’s collective dinner, without a hint of irony, a one-man *workshow* that employed the collective mind belonging to all of us.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, this type of curatorial strategy still remains the most successful one. Inspired by the critique of decision-making power and new-media enthusiasm, the online weblog 3xpozicija.lt (since 2006, founded by Vytautas Michelkevičius and Tadas Šarūnas), which sought to develop a model of public curatorial and creative work, was not met with sufficient enthusiasm by the artists concerned with protecting their copyright, and acts as more of an experimental test platform today.

### Community Life

Even if interaction and community-based thinking are not strategic creative issues but are employed simply as the “material” of a work of art, artists cannot avoid collaboration with various preexisting or new, usually short-lived and random, communities.

The exploration of existing communities is a trademark aspect of Artūras Raila’s projects, which began back in the second half of the 1990s. Raila’s creative tactic is different from that of the other Lithuanian artists who sometimes do the work of “ethnographers” (for instance, Evaldas Jansas) in that he does not simply document the communities but instead draws them

into his own artistic environment, prompting them to adapt their competencies and norms of community life to a new situation. Thus, a group of bikers rode into the halls of the CAC (*Once You Pop, You Can’t Stop*, 1997), the lobby was almost occupied by the headquarters of a radical political faction (*Us or No-one*, 1998), and a group of unemployed people marched alongside the hallway wall (exhibition *Walls for NATO*, 2001), while in the project *Emission* (2004), the role of exhibits was taken by custom-modified cars (*Roll Over Museum/Live*). In the continuous project *Power of the Earth*, started in 2005, geopathic-energy experts invited by Raila studied and mapped the energy fields of the CAC’s building. Although the notion of collaboration was not particularly emphasised here, while the issues of authorship were not addressed at all, the search for consensus was the principal condition of these projects’ existence and the basis for both the formation of the communities themselves and the success of their collaboration with the artist.

The initiation of temporary communities is also associated with the aforementioned curatorial strategy; groups of people like guests of collective dinners or visitors of exhibition openings can be understood as communities. It is interesting that the majority of temporary community-related projects realised in the Lithuanian context are focused exclusively on the problems of urban and public space. It can even be stated that public space as a notion and an issue entered the public discourse precisely after the birth of the *Pro-test Lab* (2005) initiated by Nomedas and Gediminas Urbonas, a project that not only addressed the current topic of privatisation of public space but also became a spot for the meeting and emergence of diverse communities (urbanism activists, environmentalists, political movements, and, finally, cinema and music lovers, etc.). The public realm was used as a laboratory for the observation of communities’ emergence, growth, negotiations, and conflicts, its multilayered nature almost equalling that of continuous psychological studies.

The spontaneous emergence of random communities is also employed for exploring the urban geography: *Flash Bar* (2006–08), initiated by Mirjam Wirz, a series of gatherings in obscure places of the city (defunct taxi car-park, football stadium, a meeting spot favoured by troublemaking car-obsessed youths, the yards of suburban apartment blocks, etc.); PB8’s *Trolleybus Nr. 0* (2006), a round trip around a specifically designed trolleybus route,

8 — Aurelija Juodytė, “Apie televiziją, arba Pokštas kaip pramogos kritika,” in *Šiaurės Atėnai*, 9 October 2004.

9 — Julija Fomina, “Maisto gamybos *workshow*\*: eksperimentinė virtuvė ir socialinė sąveika,” in *Literatūra ir menas*, 29 October 2004.

# 24/7

SMC / CAC

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## What's New? Nothing New... Everything Is Fine!



**Live: situations, performances, transmissions, seminars by**  
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**Screens and projections by**  
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Rich Aldrich, Melissa Brown, Yane Calovski, Mariana Deball, Stephanie Diamond, Gardar Elde Einarsson, Patrick Killoran, Jeroen Kooljans, Dariusz Likewičius, Jonathan Monk, Nomads & Residents, Michael Rakowitz, Lisi & Kenny Raskin, Karin Sander, Igor Savchenko, Alma Skersky, Sandra Strauskait, Mario Garcia Torres, Oscar Tuzon, Roger Welch, Judi Wertheim, Carey Young, Inga Zimprich.

### Contributions for the Early edition of the 24/7 newspaper by

Miriam Böhm, Boogie, Joris Brouwers, François Bucher, Craig Buckley, Yane Calovski, Haan Chau & Emily Wei, Eduardo Costa, Jose Cruz, Mariana Castillo Deball, Cristina Della Giustina, Anita Di Bianco, Gardar Elde Einarsson, Thomas W. Ellier, David Ellis, Nicolette Enke, Marisha Farnsworth, Olivier Fouton & Ella Kiaschka, Rene Gabri, Rainer Ganahl, Mindaugas Gapdėvičius, Hope Ginsburg, Massimiliano Gioni, Leon Grodski, Nicolas Guagnini, Ruben Gutierrez, Ilana Halperin, David Hatcher, Ken Hollings, IBIO Projects, Jeffrey Inaba & Peter Zellner, Linas Jablonskis, Derek Jackson, Matthew Keegan, Sol Kiyok, Aprilia Konrad, Vasil Kortun, Anders Kreuger, Elke Krystofek, Will Kwan, Tanya Leighton, Geert Lovink, Aura Makny, Howard McCaleb, Dariusz Mikshys, Jonas Mekas, Carrie Moyer, John Peter Nilsson, Haruko Okano, Jenny Perlin, Cesare Pietrolusti, Paulina Egle Pukyte, Elvis Richardson, Egle Rindzeviciute, Halsey Rodman, Douglas Ross, Beatriz Santiago, Edgar Shimiz, Lukasz Skapski, Carl Skelton, Ali Subotnick, Valerie Tevere, Mario Garcia Torres, Oscar Tuzon, Cristine Wang, Sislei Khalil, Peter Ziliaty, Inga Zimprich.

### Participants of Transference video program

Robby Abate, Peggy Ahwesh, Damian Calera, Patty Chang, Forcefield, Peter Geschwind, Leah Gilliam, Joseph Maida, Dave McKenzie, Gabriel de la Mora, Clifford Owens, Alix Pearlstein, Julio Soto, Kirsten Stollmann, Emil Vey Duke/Cooper Battersey, Abbey Williams.

### 16 Beaver Group Participants

Not including many of the names that have been mentioned above and those who will join during the exhibition, particularly those in the city: Ayreen Anastas, Pier Paolo Corio, Jim Costanzo, c. cred. Andrew Demirjian, FUSE Magazine, Esther Cabara, Rene Gabri, Helen Gyger, Janna Graham, Alla Hassan-Khan, Deidre Hoguet, Susan Kelly, Peter Lasch, Kevin Leighton, Yates McKee, Avi Mograbi, Steven Morton, Kevin Noble, Giancarlo Norese, Paige Sarlin, Shelly Silver, Oia Stahl, Peter Walsh, ...

„Kas naujo? Nieko naujo... Vadinasi, viskas tvarkoje!“

accompanied by a soundtrack commenting on the city's dynamics; *The Joy Is Not Mentioned* (2007) by Eglė Budvytytė, Goda Budvytytė, and Ieva Misevičiūtė, dancing in urban public space and a collective radio broadcast. Although such one-off projects do not reach the in-depth study effect demonstrated by the *Pro-test Lab*, they nevertheless protect the artist from the function of a social worker or society's saviour, enabling him or her to enjoy the aesthetic of impulsiveness and discovery.

### Cooperation

Collaborative practices of the third type are based on the co-op experience. Cooperation—collaboration that brings together different skills and modes of knowledge for the sake of unexpected yet productive encounters—is also a distinct feature of some of the projects mentioned previously. For instance, almost all of Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas's projects from the last decade were based on cooperative work—from *tvvv.plotas* (1998–99), *Transaction* (2000–04), and *RR: Ruta Remake* (2004) to *Pro-test Lab* (2005) and *Villa Lithuania* (2007) at the Venice Biennale, during which the artists worked with Italian and Lithuanian pigeon breeders, architects, glass manufacturers, journalists, diplomats, politicians, etc.<sup>10</sup>

In Lithuania's culture of the last decade, cooperation became a common method employed by various art and art-education projects, as well as numerous interesting or failed joint cultural initiatives. The model of a workshop bringing together experts in different fields (researchers, artists, designers, architects, social activists, etc.) to work on one issue or with a common goal stands in contrast to the *plein-air* favoured during the Soviet period and long after it was over. It is evident that, at least up to this point, such combination of different skills and paradigms gives more interesting and practically useful results than, say, a symposium that adds new works to a sculpture garden every year. Some of the participants and visitors of *RAM6* (2004), which was virtually the first major art workshop in Lithuania and which brought together artists and researchers working with new media, joined the *Pro-test Lab* half a year later. The visual identity of the KultFlux platform (active since 2008), practically the only alternative cultural space in Vilnius, as well as the Neris riverbank surrounding it, had been shaped

and later renewed annually using a workshop setting as well. This principle still rarely works in the education of the general public. The *Art-o-thlon* project (2009, Lithuanian National Television), a reality-TV show that aimed at bringing art out from gallery spaces, facilitated communication with the public, and questioned the traditional methods of art education.<sup>11</sup> While this could have become the decade's cooperation between art and popular culture, it was met with reluctance by viewers and with hostility by the community of artists and culture workers, and ended in heated conflicts between the participants and the project's creative team. "Artists will never find a common language with the masses. Not that anybody needs it anyway."<sup>12</sup>

### Epilogue: Regarding Non-Collaboration

In conclusion, I would like to write about the decade's fourth model of collaboration—namely, collaboration and cooperation between institutions—though such examples are scarce in Lithuania. In the sharply divided art environment, not only does the centre not engage in any relationship with the periphery, but also the major cities' art spaces and even academic institutions do not initiate any joint projects either. Some of the rare recent cases of collaboration—the CAC exhibition about the activity of the Lithuanian Interdisciplinary Artists' Association titled *Ten Years of Non-Institutional Activity* (2004, curated by Deimantas Narkevičius), the almost-ironically titled joint project of the CAC, Kaunas Picture Gallery, and Meno Parkas Gallery *101.3 KM: Competition and Collaboration* (2006), and the exhibition *Post Ars\_20\_contexts* (2009, curated by Daiva Citvarienė), transferred to the CAC from Kaunas Vytautas Magnus University's Art Gallery 101—can also be understood as acts of appropriation, when an institution that has the "power of deciding who is worthy of going into history and who is not"<sup>13</sup> selects noteworthy projects that have been realised elsewhere.

It appears that the only context in which Lithuanian cultural institutions are ready to work on joint projects is that of festivals; this mode of collaboration becomes obvious when one looks at many of the Vilnius: European Capital of Culture 2009 projects, such as the one-day-long *Let There Be Night* event that prompts academies, museums, and galleries to

11 — As described in the project description at [www.artothlon.com](http://www.artothlon.com). [URL no longer active. —Ed.]

12 — "Eteriu per meną. Paulina Pukytė kalbasi su kitais," in *7 meno dienos*, 18 September 2009.

13 — "Viešas atsisakymas priimti dešimtmečio meno žvaigždės statusą," in *7 meno dienos*, 14 May 2010.

10 — For more information, see: "'Flying High' (Cristina Ricupero in conversation with Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas)," in *CAC Interview*, 2007, No. 7–8.

open their doors, late at night, to the general public in a coordinated festival atmosphere. Still, Lithuanian institutions' mutual relationships are mostly characterised not by collaboration, and not even by competition, but rather clearly articulated hierarchical and "top-bottom" or "bottom-top" structures.

Perhaps it is the artists' similar hierarchical mentality and institutional orientation or the loss of collectivist enthusiasm which characterised the last decade that determines the essential absence of artist-run spaces or long-term collaborative initiatives (some of the exceptions include the chaotically active Artkor space run by the students of the Justinas Vienožinskis Art School and the Vilnius Academy of Arts and the Lithuanian Interdisciplinary Artists' Association,

which persistently attempts to reinvent itself through group projects). Any creative collaborative or cooperative initiatives (for instance, the summer projects realised in the small town of Žagarė by the students of the Vilnius Academy of Arts in 2005–06) usually go into stagnation as the artists grow out of student age. The centralised Lithuanian art scene, it seems, could again use some of Diržys's *Los artistas unidos* ... minus the old-fashioned scent of radicalism, which could encourage artists to simply look for other methods of work and distribution.

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## The Nineties in Slovak Society: The Crushing of Values

LÝDIA PRIBIŠOVÁ

[...]

### The Nineties of the 20th Century in Slovak Visual Art:

#### The Victory of Neoliberal Individualism

In the new free situation in the 1990s, Slovak artists turned their attention to current developments in the outside world, reacting a little belatedly to contemporary world art and starting to take part in international art exhibitions and events. Ideas revolving around the still-incomprehensible postmodern movement were in fashion. The work of young artists took on questions of the perception of time and space, the meaning of word and text, and continued to deploy attributes of the postmodern such as plurality, fragmentation, simulacrum, irony, deconstruction, opened structure, ambiguity, depersonalisation, impersonality and existential vulnerability. There was a shift in the perception of time towards discontinuity, bringing with it the new phenomenon of "nomadic wandering" through time and space, cultures and civilisations, and a rawness of form.<sup>1</sup> Influences

from philosophy (Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Virilio, José Ortega y Gasset, Gianni Vattimo and others) began to penetrate into art. It would be difficult to make sense of the tracks of art in the nineties outside the context of philosophy and science.<sup>2</sup> What is more, during the nineties the new sense of freedom and the plural reality of the postmodern situation<sup>3</sup> encouraged overlap and interpenetration of media: sculptors started to paint, painters produced objects and began to work with digital technologies. Many artists embarked on experimentation in the "new media," above all in the art of installation and video. Interest in video art only became marked in the final phase of the nineties, when the equipment necessary to produce it had become rather more economically accessible and user-friendly.

The visual art of the nineties in Slovakia needs to be considered in the context of the

2 — Hlavajová, Mária: *Interiér versus Exteriér alebo Na hranici možných svetov*. Katalóg výstavy. Bratislava. Ed: Hlavajová, Mária, Bratislava 1996, p. 4.

3 — Welsch, Wolfgang: *Estetické myslenie*. Bratislava 1993, p. 143. In his thoughts on the concurrent situation of plurality, Hans Belting went even further, claiming that "the state of the matter is incorrectly labelled pluralism, because this concept already comes from a different time that still recognised the opposite of pluralism." In: Belting, Hans: *Konec dějin umění*. Praha 2000, p. 197.

1 — The most resonant questions of the art of the nineties were discussed in the survey "The Nineties," in *Profil*, 1996, no. 1–2, p. 78–115. This was a survey devoted to three aspects of the art of the nineties: 1. The body in art, its presence and absence, pathological expressions and death, 2. The new media in relation to the structure and quality of life (thought, art), 3. Art, money and politics.

background of social-political changes, such as the belated recognition accorded to the most prominent of the persecuted artists, the transformation of the Academy of Fine Arts and other institutions and the emergence of non-state galleries and initiatives. As Petra Hanáková observes: "As we reconstruct the art historical discourse at the beginning of the nineties, we see in it an almost surprising optimism, a romantic faith in the speed of the pro-Western changes."<sup>4</sup> The impatiently anticipated rise of a free market in art and contact and interaction with the art scene abroad was succeeded in the second half of the nineties, as in political life, by disillusion caused by the stressful necessity of choice, the loss of an enemy (previously one of the main factors of artistic inspiration), and the inevitable need to look out for oneself. Another factor was the steep decline in the social prestige of artists. Outside interest in the East European art created behind the Iron Curtain intensified in the first half of the nineties but very soon flickered out.

In scholarly writing on art in the nineties (which was very abundant, for almost every exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue and numerous critical reviews), it was symptomatic that in many cases curators and art theorists were at a loss as to how to deal with the most contemporary art; they failed to grasp its thinking and interpretational possibilities. They often tried to mask this failure by using an elite newspeak full of Anglicisms. This frequently sounded like a stream of empty formulaic phrases and far from giving viewers a deeper understanding of works, put them off still further. This phenomenon has been discussed by Petra Hanáková in the publication *Ženy—inštitúcie? [Women—Institutions?]*,<sup>5</sup> which shows a great deal about the logic of how the art world functioned in the nineties.

[...]

### **The Past: 60/90. Fourth Annual Exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts Slovakia**

[...]

[Here,] I set myself the task of reinterpreting [the exhibition 60/90] at the [2014 exhibition] *Paradox 90*. specifically because of its "prophetic" quality with regard to the present,

because of the clairvoyance of the young curators who, through the exhibition, predicted many facts and connections that were to emerge in full even years afterwards.

The exhibition 60/90 was held in 1997 (October 23–November 22) in Bratislava. It was the result of a curatorial workshop organised by the Bratislava SCCA for students of art history, potential future curators. The condition for participating in the workshop was submission of a project presenting contemporary Slovak art.<sup>6</sup> Thirteen students attended, by no means a small number given that curating contemporary art in Slovakia in the new conditions after the fall of the Iron Curtain was one of the newest, but also least well-defined, of occupations, with a very unclear profile. An international jury chose as winner a project presented by two of the young curators, the twenty-three-year-old Petra Hanáková and Alexandra Kusá, one year older.<sup>7</sup> Other workshop participants were involved in its realisation in various capacities, from technical assistance (Juraj Čarný, Monika Mitášová, who also organised the series of so-called *Ephemeral Exhibitions*)<sup>8</sup> to public relations (Henrieta Mackovjaková, Iveta Pospíšilová). Some of them were already working as SCCA employees at the time.

The project concept was inspired by extensive discussions on the theme of the "sixties" (organised on the occasion of an exhibition of the same name presented at the time in the [Slovak National Gallery (SNG)]), which were published in the only Slovak journal exclusively devoted to contemporary art at the time, *Profil*,<sup>9</sup> and by the subsequent round table on the theme of the nineties in the next number of *Profil*,<sup>10</sup> which explored various interfaces between these two decades.

6 — Hlavajová, Mária: "60/90." In: 60/90. IV. Výročná výstava SCCA Slovensko, Bratislava, 1997.

7 — Katalin Néray (Ludwig Museum, Budapest), Bart de Baere (Museum van Hederdaagse Kunst, Gent), Lóránd Hegyi (Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna), Peter Pakesch (Kunsthal Basel), Ada Krnáčová-Gutleber (Galerie Švestka, Prague), Peter Michalovič (Philosophy Faculty, Comenius University, Bratislava), Katarína Rusnáková (PGU, Žilina), Mária Orišková (VŠVU/University of Fine Arts, Bratislava), Marta Smolíková (Open Society Fund, Praha), Mária Hlavajová (Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Bratislava).

8 — Ten theoreticians and art historians presented the work of ten artists in the form of ephemeral visual events (usually slides) followed by discussion on contemporary art in Slovakia. These "events" took place in the—alas, today no longer existing—Stoka Theatre in Bratislava.

9 — *Profil*, no. 1–2, 1996. The oldest art journal in Slovakia was *Výtvarný život (Art Life)* from 1956, but this had folded in 1995. See, <http://www.culture.gov.sk/posobnost-ministerstva/umenie/vytvarne-umenie-bb.html>.

10 — *Profil*, no. 1–2, 1996, p. 118–129. The discussion was chaired by Jana Geržová, and the participants were Jana and Jiří Ševčík, Miloš Vojtěchovský, Marta Smolíková, Jiří Olič, Anna Grusková, Zuzana Bartošová, Juraj Mojžiš, Peter Michalovič and Boris Ondrečka.

4 — Hanáková, Petra: "Rané 90. roky—sny a realita." In: *Ženy—inštitúcie? K dejinám prevádzky deväťdesiatych rokov*. VŠVU, Slovart, Bratislava 2010, p. 28.

5 — Hanáková, Petra: "Newspaper alebo kunsthistoria ako kamufáž." In: *Ženy—inštitúcie? K dejinám prevádzky deväťdesiatych rokov*, VŠVU, Slovart, Bratislava 2010.

The curatorial aim of the 60/90 exhibition was to present the work of artists whose careers had started and had roots in the sixties, in collaboration and juxtaposition with the art of the young generation, i.e., the work of progressive artists relevant for the nineties. In the exhibition, the curators posed the question of what in the art of the sixties threw a shadow into the present, and they did so by personifying the sixties through artists who represented it. They were seeking to identify the continuity of the work of such artists from the sixties to the present and their capacity to interact with up-to-date young art of the nineties. The curators picked out five pairs of artists to serve as samples of mutual intertextual dialogue, which was then realised in different forms, from irony [and] interweaving to conscious mutual distancing.

The five pairs, all artists who had never before exhibited together in this constellation,<sup>11</sup> communicated or interacted in different ways: “Whereas one of the pairs (S. Filko and B. Ondrečka) collaborated literally physically on the project, for another two pairs (J. Jankovič and D. Sadovská, J. Želibská and E. Pätoprstá) the constitutive aspect was a relationship of commentary. The result of the collaboration between J. Koller and R. Ondák might be called interplay (intellectual pingpong) and the relationship between M. Bartuszová and D. Lehocká, harmony.”<sup>12</sup> The artists representing the sixties generation at the exhibition offered current works, with the exception of the deceased Mária Bartuszová. The pairs crystallised gradually, as we can see from the documentation in the SCCA archives, which shows that other possible pairs considered were interactions between Rudolf Fila–Roman Ondák, Július Koller–Marko Blažo, Jana Želibská–Eva Filová (planned in the Galéria Tatrastvo), Marko Blažo–Vladimír Havrilla, or Marko Blažo–Peter Bartoš. For some incomprehensible reason, there was no consideration of possible participation by Alex Mlynářík, a central player in the art of the sixties. Finally, however, an effective choice was made of pairings that had a strong rationale from the point of view of today’s perspective, too.

Judging by the text in the catalogue, the young curators left the choice of works almost entirely in the hands of the artists.<sup>13</sup> Here a

major role was played by the happy choice of artists, who managed to create valuable interactions on their own, without secondary authoritative curatorial interventions.

Like the previous annual Soros Center exhibition,<sup>14</sup> the 60/90 exhibition was held in non-gallery as well as gallery space, but what was new was the degree of decentralisation—the exhibition was held in four places: in the Gallery Živa, where the work of Mária Bartuszová–Denisa Lehocká was displayed; in the former photo studio Rembrandt on Panská Street, where Roman Ondák baked [sweet pastry messages based on] street recordings, seconded by Július Koller; in the former Stürzer Patisserie on Sedlárska Street, which was transformed by Stano Filko and Boris Ondrečka into a site-specific installation; and the Gallery Medium. (It would have been more logical to present Ondák’s culinary project in the former Stürzer Patisserie). The use of the non-gallery spaces—the former Stürzer Patisserie and the former Rembrandt photo studio—was made possible by the good relations between the SCCA coordinator Boris Ondrečka and the then-mayor Peter Kresánek. The Gallery Živa was lent for the purpose by Monika Mitášová, who was its director at the time.<sup>15</sup>

First, let us look at two original interactions of the pairs whose work was reinterpreted at the exhibition *Paradox 90*.

The project *K.O.munikácia* [*K.O.munication*] by Július Koller and Roman Ondák was not collaborative in the true sense of the word; each of them worked by himself, and the common aspect of their parallel activity was, as the name of their project declared, communication. (In her review, Jana Geržová called this proclaimed form of collaboration a practical speechlessness.)<sup>16</sup> As Hanáková and Kusá write: “Ondák’s installation takes as theme the communication of information, Koller’s theme is its censorship.”<sup>17</sup> Ondák’s work was a literal, succinct transcription of the idea of the consumption of information, drawing attention to its mechanical, production-like, automated production in a bakery. In his project *Communicative Consumption*, Roman Ondák caught scraps of

11 — Geržová, Jana: “Umenie žije, ale čo sa stalo s umelcami?” In: *Domino Fórum*, 1997.

12 — Hanáková, Petra, and Kusá, Alexandra: “60/90.” In: *60/90. IV. Výročná výstava SCCA Slovensko*, Bratislava 1997, p. 8–11.

13 — Ibid.

14 — The 3rd annual Soros Center Slovakia exhibition, *Interiér versus Exteriér or Na hranici (možných) svetov/On the Border of (possible) Worlds* took place in the former Bratislava brush factory in the complex of the joint-stock company Cosmos on Radlinského Street in Bratislava in 1996.

15 — From an interview with Petra Hanáková and Alexandra Kusá in Bratislava in March 2014.

16 — Ibid.

17 — Hanáková, Petra, and Kusá, Alexandra, op. cit., p. 9.

conversation on a recorder hidden in a shoe-box, and then copied them down in a notebook. He mixed dough in an improvised kitchen and cut letters out of it to form selected sentences from the notebook. After taking them out of the oven, he served visitors individual sentences made from the letters on plates on a counter in the gallery. This process was repeated throughout the whole exhibition. The visitor consumed the de-composed selected sentences, and what remained on the plates were just randomly arranged letters without the decipherable content of this or that sentence—which is a situation occurring in everyday communication. Ondák was pointing out the danger of the ownership of information, the danger of the interception, manipulation and political distortion of the meaning of information,<sup>18</sup> with indirect reference to the actual political context of the time. Meanwhile, like Stano Filko, Július Koller in his presentation “depository of intercepted information”<sup>19</sup> used fragments of earlier works of his own: the motif of the net, tennis racquets. Koller was alluding to ways of curtailing communication, getting stuck in the net, and so to the way in which communication structures can expand on the one hand (the innovation of the Internet) but on the other hand also block the flow of information. It was a theme that he had been developing over the long term and is present in earlier works, such as alterations to empty sports centres without real sportspeople from the seventies. His *Ufonaut* of 1996–97 also had this net on his head.<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, not even the fall of communism rid Koller of his obsession with thoughts of isolation, of being stuck. In this gesture we might also see resonances with the actual political situation “under Mečiar,” not so very unlike the former regime. Related meanings could be discerned in the volumes of *Yellow Pages* (omnipresent and available to all for the purpose of providing information) stuck in a “golden” cage and shuttlecocks in hanging fishing nets. According to Koller, the shuttlecocks meant a moment of play, and the nets were the blind alleys of communication.<sup>21</sup>

Koller, who had created many much more remarkable works than the installation presented at the 60/90 exhibition (in the words of Jana Geržová: “He is caught in the net of his own mystifications”), here, too, deployed his characteristic principles of sport and word games. “Koller has always been interested in coming out in conflict with rules. But in a planned way and only with particular rules. For Koller, sport was a simulation (of how) his art might enter into a relationship with the social system if the main rules had applied at the time.”<sup>22</sup> The pairing Koller–Ondák functioned on the basis of a common spiritual inclination later, too, as we can see for example from a discussion between the two in the publication by Július Koller, *Universal Futurological Operations* (2003). Here, Koller said that he had “already chosen tennis back in 1968 as the symbol of democratic communication, where it is possible to maintain/preserve on the basis of certain rules of fair-play, the potential for communication and confrontation, both competition and exchange of opinions... it was a kind of individualisation of experiments in communication, which at the time was visibly weakening.”<sup>23</sup>

A special case was the display of the work by Mária Bartuszová, a deceased artist, to which Denisa Lehocká reacted with her own work. It was Lehocká and not the curators who chose the works concerned. Obviously these were older works and not current production, as in the case of the other artists. What is more, Bartuszová was an artist who was not so typical of the 1960s. The curators admitted these “exceptions,” but their inclusion at the exhibition turned out to be the right move. In Slovak sculpture, Mária Bartuszová represents a unique line of organic sculpture based on universal principles and the creation of elementary shapes—bioforms. The flow of energy in the material, the “fluid” nature of the sculptural form—this is the essence of Bartuszová’s work. Fragility, vulnerability and ephemerality connect it to natural processes.<sup>24</sup> Similar archetypal characteristics emerge in the work of Denisa Lehocká. She composes her installations from different, varying modules, with which, as Ruth Noack wrote, “She tried to postpone the meaning for as long as possible.”<sup>25</sup>

18 — Documentary film for the exhibition 60/90. Documentary film by Marek Šulík on the exhibition 60/90 made for the SCCA Slovensko Film Factory in 1997.

19 — Ibid.

20 — Havránek, Vít, Obrist, Hans-Ulrich, Ondák, Roman, Schöllhammer, Georg: *Július Koller Univerzálna Futurologické Operácie. Viedeň, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Kolin, tranzit, Remaprint 2003*, p. 27–28.

21 — Documentary film for the exhibition 60/90. Documentary film by Marek Šulík on the exhibition 60/90 made for the SCCA Slovensko Film Factory in 1997.

22 — Havránek, Vít: *J. K. a slovenská kultúrná situace*. Tamže, p. 225.

23 — Július Koller in conversation with Roman Ondák, ibid., p. 209.

24 — Beskid, Vladimír: *Cesta k organickej plastike*. Katalóg výstav, Bratislava, Slovenská národná galéria 2005.

25 — Noack, Ruth: “Kto sa bojí Denisy Lehoček?” In: *Denisa Lehočeká*, katalóg výstav, Bratislava, Slovenská národná galéria 2012, p. 18.



Later, Denisa Lehocká also started to work in plaster, producing various organic installations, thus coming closer to Bartuszová; the exhibition 60/90 may be considered also as a kind of prefiguration of her subsequent direction.

Given the intimate character of the work, for the pairing Bartuszová–Lehocká, Alexandra Kusá and Petra Hanáková chose the Gallery Živa, which in disposition resembled a two-room apartment in a more outlying part of Bratislava, away from the centre. Displayed in the two rooms were Lehocká's wall-paintings, in shades of white, black and grey, the shadows of interior furnishings (shelves, benches, little pictures) evoking abstract symbols, and two Lehocká readymades—wigs—together with two pairs of Bartuszová's plaster organic shell objects. Lehocká inserted Bartuszová's works with precision into the composition of her murals. The fragile plaster objects were mounted in plexiglass cases.

Like Bartuszová's objects, Lehocká's allusive painting produced an impression of fading fragments. The two artists were also connected by ephemerality (one of the key concepts of the project 60/90), the *anaesthetics*<sup>26</sup> of the works displayed, and both work with the element of absence, the sense of something missing. Lehocká's installation had its origin in diary entries, computer drawings; the artist had projected some of these onto the wall and painted them on in site-specific spirit. One can agree with the curators that while the work of the two artists can be considered emotional, in Bartuszová's case there is a "feeling of germination," while Lehocká's work radiates empathy and "consciousness," but the mistiness of something seen many times.<sup>27</sup>

Another successful exhibit at the 60/90 exhibition, although one that could not be realised in the project *Paradox 90*. in the Bratislava Kunsthalle in 2014 for technical reasons and partly because of the poor health of Stano Filko, was his site-specific installation created in collaboration with Boris Ondreička. The cult representative of the sixties wave of art, Stano Filko, and the prominent artist of the young generation, Boris Ondreička, both resolute antagonists, transformed the abandoned premises of the former Stürzer Patisserie into a highly individual site-specific installation titled *Spolocnekazdysam–Togethereachalone*. The starting point for both artists was a sophisticated

system of personal mythologies. Although most of the works there by Stano Filko were made especially for the exhibition, the installation included elements of older works, such as from *Pink and Red Weapons* (1985/86), and *Happsoc*, and various plates with inscriptions. In this work, he developed his cosmological approaches and references to the Hindu chakras that have become his generally recognisable and unique mark. The pairing altered or all but demolished the space in a way that was quite unfriendly to the viewer. Its ruins provided fertile ground for the individual works, most of them based on the principle of conceptual word games. As Stano Filko said, this was not sweet but harsh postmodernism, in fact the *modern* in the *postmodern*. According to Ondreička, this joint installation was not purist: it was neither academic nor postmodern.<sup>28</sup> Ondreička likewise played variation on some of his earlier work. He tried to adjust his interventions to the aesthetics and visual style of the sixties, while with Filko it was the precise opposite—i.e., he gave his works, including the older ones, a more contemporary character. Thanks to this genuine radical artistic dialogue, their joint work gave the impression of a unified whole, often with overlapping authorship of individual interventions where both artists contributed to the same element. In the realisation the artists dissolved themselves and mutually swallowed each other by osmosis, weaving works that merged into each other and were interwoven. None of the pairings harmonised as completely as Filko and Ondreička, and this project prefigured later, more recent collaboration between the two, for example as part of the presentation in the Czech and Slovak Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005 in the project *Model of the World/Quadrophonia* (together with Ján Mančuška and Marek Pokorný).

The last space, Gallery Medium, where the pictures and reliefs by Jozef Jankovič and paintings by Dorota Sadovská were installed, was more traditional and less innovative. It was the place of display also for the pairing Jana Želibská–Elena Pätoprstá. The pairing Jankovič–Sadovská was founded on resemblance of form; the young woman artist reacted with her characteristic hyperrealist idiom to Jankovič's typical fragments of arms and legs executed in acrylic on a cardboard paper relief on canvas. According to the curators in the

26 — Welsch, Wolfgang: *Estetické myslenie*. Archa 1993.

27 — Hanáková, Petra, and Kusá, Alexandra: "60/90." In: *60/90. IV. Výročná výstava SCCA Slovensko*, Bratislava 1997, p. 11.

28 — Documentary film for the exhibition 60/90. Documentary film by Marek Šulík on the exhibition 60/90 made for the SCCA Slovensko Film Factory in 1997.



Installation view of *Performance 4: Roman Ondák*. June 24–September 14, 2009.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

catalogue, the link between the works of the two artists was condensation, which in Jankovič's case was semantic and in Sadovská's a matter of form. The curators highlighted Sadovská's ironic take (visible already in the titles of her pictures: *Slovak Land*, *Slovak Landscape*, *Slovak Partisan*) as a counterpoint to the seriousness of Jankovič's works in the exhibition. On the other hand, with the distance of time, we now see little trace of the irony but only a clunky descriptiveness. The curators had succumbed to the lure of form, which was a pity, particularly in the case of Sadovská. She brought her own style to the interpretation of Jankovič's work, at the same time attempting to transcribe his pictures by employing her own specific idiom. The exercise emphasised her peculiar characteristic elements, i.e., hyperrealism and perspective condensation.

Shooting with feminist blanks. That might be one caption for the least functional pairing of the exhibition, Jana Želibská—Elena Pätoprstá. Also in this case, the younger artist was reacting to the work of the older one. In this case the point of contact was likewise the body, and also a preference for the medium of video installation and the strategy of image manipulation. Jana Želibská exhibited the video installation *On a Diet*, on the theme of the topical problem of bulimia or anorexia, using a massive video image of a vomiting girl as the main figure, combining reality and fiction. Elena Pätoprstá's response to the finished work of Želibská was to mirror-project the outlines of the individual objects from her installation into her exhibition space. She suppressed the surfaces of these forms using doubled images, morphing into ornament, of her naked four-year-old<sup>29</sup> daughter, conjuring up the impression of genetically cloned mutants. Judging by their catalogue text and retrospective comments,<sup>30</sup> the curators were not satisfied with the effects of the "collaboration" of this pairing. They criticised both artists for a certain decorativism, and Pätoprstá for ambiguity, indecipherability, and a "diffusiveness, which they later considered typical of the nineties."<sup>31</sup> Pätoprstá took snippets from Želibská's work and used them to create a new composition by quotation, a kind of collage in her own style. The authors

did not invest enough effort in collaboration in this case either. This was when Elena Pätoprstá left the contemporary art scene and became a deputy and an activist under the name Eliška Pätoprstá.<sup>32</sup> The design of the catalogue and visual aspect of the accompanying materials for the exhibition was of a very high quality; it was distinctive and progressive for its time. It did much to promote the event and was the work of the young progressive designer Emil Drličiak. The exhibition was accompanied by various associated events, above all five evenings titled *Ephemeral Exhibitions* in the Stoka Theatre, organised by Monika Mitášová. These were a series of presentations—slide projections of a chronological selection of the work of the artists participating in the central exhibition, at which invited theoreticians offered interpretations.<sup>33</sup> Other events included a dance party in the club in the Gallery Duna, with music from the sixties and nineties and a projection of the opening of the exhibition a few hours after it took place.

[...]

### **The Present: The Reinterpretation of the Exhibition 60/90 at the Exhibition Paradox 90.**

The 60/90 exhibition seems from today's perspective to be defining because it was the first to identify these functional pairings, closely linked by the basis of the work of the artists concerned, such as above all Mária Bartusová—Denisa Lehocká and, in a broader sense, Július Koller—Roman Ondák. Unfortunately, it was not possible to revive the most long-term integrated [collaboration] initiated by the original, Stano Filko and Boris Ondrejška, at the new exhibition.

Many works of a conceptual nature from the 60/90 exhibition exploited objects of everyday consumption, making them easy to reconstruct. A specific case was the reconstruction of a work of the now-deceased Július Koller, with only the fishing nets remaining from the original *Communicative Cultural Situation* installation. The rest of the installation, conceived as an evocation and not a faithful reconstruction, was made on the basis of a documentary film about the exhibition, photographic documentation and the advice of the original curators.

29 — Drbalová, Pavlína: "60/90–4. výroční výstava SCCA v Bratislavě," In: *Ateliér* 1/1998, p. 9.

30 — Interview with Petra Hanáková and Alexandra Kusá in March 2014 in Bratislava.

31 — Hanáková, Petra, and Kusá, Alexandra: "60/90." In: *60/90. IV. Výročná výstava SCCA Slovensko*, Bratislava 1997, p. 8–11.

32 — E.g., <http://bratislava.sme.sk/c/6341597/ftacnik-nevybojval-pozemky-v-petrzalka.html>, <http://nasa-bratislava.sk/sprava-o-verejnom-prerokovaní-strategického-dokumentu/>, and others.

33 — A. Hrabušický/J. Koller; M. Hlavajová/R. Ondák; V. Beskid/M. Bartusová; H. Mackovjaková/D. Lehocká; K. Bajcurová/J. Jankovič; J. Geržová/D. Sadovská; R. Matušik/J. Želibská; M. Orišková/E. Pätoprstá; J. Cseres/S. Filko; P. Michalovič/B. Ondrejška.

The most remarkable realisations of the 60/90 exhibition were the site-specific ones, bound not just to a particular place (Denisa Lehocká, Július Koller, Boris Ondreička, Stano Filko) but to a concrete, unrepeatably time (especially in the case of Roman Ondák). This was a major consideration in the final form of the reconstruction of the exhibition at the *Paradox 90.* exhibition. Overall, work on reinterpretation (because, in fact, any sort of reconstruction of original exhibitions in a different space can never really be a reconstruction but only a reinterpretation, an evocation, highlighting key aspects) was in the spirit of the famous words of the ancient philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, "*panta rhei*" ["everything flows," often elaborated as:] one can never step twice into the same river because the water in it is ever new.

The fact that the site-specific works could not be reconstructed was the key to the reinterpretation of the work of Roman Ondák. It was based on a drawing of the time, a sketch of the original installation available in the archives of the former SCCA Slovakia, today the Foundation–Center for Contemporary Arts in Bratislava. It included forms used at the 60/90 exhibition to cut out pastry letters to be made into sentences chosen from interviews in the street.

As Ondák himself says,<sup>34</sup> even a faithful

physical reconstruction of this work of seventeen years ago in its original processual mode would, in fact, not be credible, given the different social climate and its meanings. In 1997, secretly recording in public using a shoe-box had references to the political turmoil of Meciarism. Interviews, topical themes, social discourse were simply different, and even if we were to record conversations with people in the street again, the result would be different.

The use of technology in this way, the recording of people's conversations in the public setting of the street, had its rationale at the time; back then it was an innovative technology, an experimental adventure. This performance was one of Ondák's first, and in many aspects prefigured the direction of his subsequent projects: participation, emotionality, ephemerality . . .

In conclusion, it can be added that the reinterpretation of exhibitions of the nineties in the present is definitely an adventurous and striking step, but it would be more interesting to reinterpret these exhibitions after half a century, when their meanings and qualities would stand out even more strikingly.

Excerpted from a text originally published in Slovak and English in *Paradox 90. Kurátorské koncepcie v období mečiarizmu/ Curatorial Concepts during Meciarism* (1993–1998). Edited by Juraj Čarný and Richard Gregor. Translated by Anna Bryson. Bratislava: Dom umenia/ Kunsthalle Bratislava, 2014.

34 — Interview with Roman Ondák in March 2014 in Bratislava.

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## An Interview Conducted by Václav Magid and Jakub Stejskal with Display Gallery Founders Zbyněk Baladrán, Ondřej Chrobák, and Tomáš Svoboda and the Cofounder of the tranzit Initiative for Contemporary Art Vít Havránek

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### I. Display

**JAKUB STEJSKAL:** How did the people associated with the Display Gallery get together?

**TOMÁŠ SVOBODA:** Zbyněk Baladrán and I first met as students at the Academy of Fine Arts. Zbyněk got to know Ondřej Chrobák and David

Kulhánek when they were all studying the history of art at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. The internet magazine *Bazar*, which was set up by Ondřej around 2000 when Prague was a European Capital of Culture, preceded the Display Gallery.

**ONDŘEJ CHROBÁK:** There were three of us: David, Pavel Kappel and me. Looking back we were really naive, just as we were at the start of the Display Gallery. The magazine was a kind of student effort. We had loads of time on our hands, and we felt a kind of disconnect between the external environment and our own situation. Pavel Kappel was a real technology geek. This was in 1999, when the internet was a medium which, on the one hand, held out the hope of encompassing and overcoming all of society's problems, but which on the other hand nobody here really understood. We created an internet magazine at a time when none of us even had an e-mail address. I only saw the internet for the first time after we had officially launched the magazine in some pub or other.

I think it's also quite important to point out that the environments of art-history students and artists, respectively, represented atomised spheres with no natural overlap. At that time these spheres only came into contact through the personal initiatives of certain people, older than us, such as Vítek Havránek, Martin Dostál, Radek Váňa and Gábina Bukovinská (now Kotíková), who communicated with the artistic environment. But as an art-history student, you never came into natural contact with a real live artist of your own generation.

David, Pavel and I were classical products of art history, historicising nerds if you like, although I think that David was always drawn to contemporary art. He was in contact with Zbyněk and Petr Hudeček, who were art-history students who had switched over to art school.

Pavla Drbalová (now Morganová) was in the same year as Zbyněk and David, and she also began to take our activities at *Bazar* seriously. Via *Bazar*, we got to know the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art and the Jelení Gallery. After graduating, David did his national service at the Centre. Jelení was getting up and running at the same time and starting to operate as a gallery exhibiting the Centre's scholarship holders.

**ZBYNĚK BALADRÁN:** There were one or two dates put aside for scholarship holders. Otherwise Gábina had her own programme of discovering young artists, which continues to this day. She exhibits young, unknown artists who are usually having their first exhibition. In 2000, I had my first solo exhibition there, and Tomáš had exhibited there before me.

By coincidence, David was doing his national service there at the time, and he and I started to talk about a gallery scene which didn't exist here. We thought about what we ourselves

lacked, and we realised that there was no other gallery apart from Jelení, and that Jelení repeated the same and simple formula, i.e., exhibitions of young artists, mostly from the Academy of Fine Arts or the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design. We reckoned that it had to be dead easy to create such a gallery, run it and put on exhibitions of something alternative. And so the first impulse was to create a gallery where we wouldn't exhibit any Czechs but art from abroad that we were interested in but didn't have the chance to see in this country on any level.

[. . .]

**JS:** When you were discussing what was to become the Display Gallery, were there any ideas, artists or concepts that attracted you in particular?

**TS:** Everything operated on a very intuitive level. Taste was the common denominator. As I saw it, all of us were sensitive to and agreed on similar things.

**ZB:** We had been severely restricted in terms of artistic production at the Academy, where everything was geared toward painting. Students created groups like *Luxsus*, and it was felt that painting should be the most interesting thing going on in this country. Even though in 2000 Tomáš and I were ourselves involved in painting, we felt that we should head in a completely different direction. Intuitively we were inclining toward post-conceptual art.

**OC:** As I remember it, the common denominator was our dissatisfaction with the situation at that time. You've got loads of energy, and you want to put it out there. Not in the sense of being visible yourself but in the sense of doing something real. Other important reference points for us have since been forgotten, for instance the exhibition 99CZ, put on by Milan Salák with Jiří David and Jan Kadlec. That exhibition arose out of what were unusual activities for that time and brought together people who were not representatives of institutions like the National Gallery or the Soros Centre. A kind of alternative establishment was created. I didn't even care whether we were going to exhibit painting or something post-conceptual. The truth is, we didn't really know what we would exhibit in our gallery.

**VÁCLAV MAGID:** But when you mention the exhibition 99CZ, I remember that it was provocative at that time precisely because there was almost no painting and conceptual art predominated.

At the time, this was seen as a very confrontational gesture.

**OC:** We had a kind of intuitive opinion. We were able to identify with that conceptual character.

**TS:** I think in my case a very important role was played by the fact that I had an exhibition in Stuttgart, Germany, organised by students of the local academy, who rented a former factory and turned it into a gallery. I realised that it was a relatively easy thing to accomplish and that it didn't cost too much money if you had the motivation to make it happen. When you've gotten rid of certain practical misgivings of that kind, you're no longer hesitant about applying to the municipal authorities, looking for a space and so on. And the gallery then came into being as a physical space.

**OC:** Another thing I remember was that we were opposed to projects being organised by Ivan Mečl, such as the attempt to revitalise Vyšehrad train station, or NoD-style projects, i.e., the idea of a "multi-culti" environment, where dance, theatre and gallery would all be under one roof. The nineties tended to be about big projects. Some guy with a printer applies for a grant to renovate a historical building, and the next thing there's an arts centre there. However, we knew from the start that we didn't want to create an internet café, theatre and cinema in one, that what we wanted was simply a gallery.

**ZB:** Mind you, we were also wary of the term "gallery." Right from the start we didn't call it the Display Gallery but "Display – a Space for Contemporary Art."

**OC:** But in fact we created a normal gallery. What was new was that, although in the nineties there were people who were fully capable of cooperation, nobody had created a community. Things tended to be based upon individual personalities, such as Radek Váňa, Vítek, Martin Dostál, and Marek Pokorný. There was no platform whose members would systematically work together.

**VÍTEK HAVRÁNEK:** Either that or such cooperation was based on money, which Display wasn't. I'm referring to exhibitions linked with institutions, which appeared and disappeared.

**JS:** When I looked at the *Displaybook*, it occurred to me that only about a third or less of the artists exhibited were Czech. How did the organisation of this space work? How did you decide whom to exhibit? How did you attract foreign artists, when you hadn't made any name for yourselves outside of the Czech Republic?

**TS:** We decided to mount ten exhibitions a year. There would be a break in summer, and one of the ten would be devoted to a Czech artist we were interested in. Alongside the exhibition programme, shortly after opening the gallery we introduced what we called the "sub-label program," where we offered space to current events or one-off lectures or projects, and here we were significantly more open to the Czech environment.

**OC:** But it was clear in advance that we were going to exhibit foreign art.

**TS:** That's what the whole idea was based on.

**OC:** We agreed that we didn't want to compete with Jelení and vie for students from the two good-quality studios at that time, i.e., those of Vladimír Skrepl and Jiří David. We were more interested in striking up communication and mediating foreign art. As far as contacts were concerned, chance played a role.

**ZB:** We developed contacts gradually. We had no fixed agenda. We met Roman Ondák by chance, and David and I decided that it would be great if he had his first exhibition with us. Unfortunately, Ondák was already part of a larger event at the Václav Špála Gallery and refused, saying he had too much work. But when we started talking about what art we would like to exhibit, he mentioned various people who could start the gallery with us. For instance, he mentioned Josef Dabernig. And gradually, via individual artists and curators, more and more contacts came our way and the programme grew out of personal acquaintances. This was how the first year was organised, and gradually things took on a clearer contour. Added to that the environment started to change. Ján Mančuška began exhibiting abroad, and other people started travelling. We were regular visitors of the Berlin Biennale and Manifesta, and we brought back certain names and contacts with us. Above all, we concentrated on relatively well-known but not yet famous artists. When we brought Josef Dabernig over, nobody knew him, even though in the world at large he was not unknown.

**VM:** He had his exhibition at Display in the same year that he exhibited at the Berlin Biennale (2001) and a year after being exhibited at Manifesta (2000).

**OC:** The fact that Dabernig responded to us set the bar high. We were lucky in that, on the basis of Roman's recommendation, we found someone who wasn't arrogant and even though he had exhibited in Venice didn't mind coming

over and launching his exhibition in some off-space in Holešovice.

**ZB:** Dabernig then told us about the Austrian scene as he saw it. He outlined who was working there and what they were doing, and suddenly we had an overview of a scene which previously we had known nothing about. Until then, Austria for us had simply meant MUMOK and a few large galleries.

**TS:** In addition, Zbyněk, David and I were receiving various grants to study abroad. For instance, I spent four months in Bern and got to know the local scene. I went through the entire archive of the municipal gallery, and as a result of that we happened to have two exhibitions at Display. David did the same thing when he was in the USA.

**JS:** How did you finance the exhibitions?

**ZB:** At the beginning we had the naive idea that we would finance it ourselves. The rent wasn't much, only CZK 4,000. We thought that if each of us contributed CZK 1,500, that would be enough. But David, whom we elected director, was soon applying for money from the municipal authorities and the Ministry of Culture, and so the next year the project was being funded by grants.

**OC:** The budget was CZK 100,000 for one year.

**ZB:** This was a huge amount of money for us at the time. But let's not forget that the first video exhibition was on VHS. A video installation was a lot more problematic than it is today: someone had to make the VHS, which meant creating endless loops, there were no projectors, etc.

**TS:** Right at the start we were helped by our parents. My father put money into the refurbishment. Zbyněk's father also contributed, and Mr. Kulháněk paid for the lighting. Although our parents only came to the first three openings before realising they didn't understand what was going on, I felt mine realised it was important.

**VM:** Your primary aim was to bring foreign artists over here. But you also put on exhibitions of a range of Czech artists abroad. How did you perceive your position as people generating and representing a certain current within Czech art? Did you see yourselves as creating a power base?

**TS:** Personally I never thought of it in terms of power, though when I look back I think that the Display Gallery succeeded in establishing a certain type of art within the Czech environment, i.e., that power was involved.

**ZB:** I believed that we were the most progressive thing happening on the contemporary Czech scene. I carried on thinking that for a few years, because the local environment was not so varied as to allow us to compare ourselves with anyone: we were basically alone. I felt that we were operating for a certain community of people who had started to gather around us, whether this involved friends like Ján Mančuška or a younger generation of students from the Academy, for instance Jiří Skála, who was one of the few Czechs to have an exhibition at Display. A group of people formed who understood each other not so much on the basis of theory or vision but taste. We didn't formulate visions or principles. This was a community formed more on the basis of practice.

**OC:** At Display we worked out a particular way of putting on exhibitions, a particular design.

**TS:** When Jiří David called us "chipboard gallery," he was right in lots of ways. It was the manifestation of a certain taste.

**VM:** I'm interested in where the roots of this taste lie.

**ZB:** I think they lie in a rejection of what was going on at the Academy.

**OC:** At the same time we were very open. Anyone could join in the environment we created. Of course taste played a large part, but it wasn't in any way an exclusive environment. We didn't have anything by which to exercise power; we had nothing to offer anyone in the way of exhibitions and contracts. Even the exhibitions of Czech artists that we organised abroad were pretty punk in character and took place in all kinds of off-spaces.

**ZB:** On the other hand, the fact that a gallery had been created meant that curators began travelling here. This bore out our status as a power base. Then we began collaborating with Vitek. What often happened was that a curator would arrive who had mainly been in contact with Vitek. This curator would invite ten artists to Display, and in this way Display and tranzit and their respective power bases started to converge.

**OC:** What I noticed was that the same people would come to these meetings as would find themselves, for instance, at a spontaneous Christmas party organised by Display. It wasn't obligatory. These were people who had something in common with Display.

**VH:** I think it's misleading to speak of power. It's more about defending a certain opinion within



the framework of its environment and trying to acquire as much support and justification as possible for it.

I wouldn't use the term "power." I would prefer to say that it involved a fight for intellectual authority over the historical canon of Czech art, which I personally saw as a conceptual fight and tried to bring it into contemporary art. Power belongs to politics, where you're not fighting for principles but simply so that you can reach compromises in the future with anyone you choose. This is the case of Milan Knížák. What was the point in time at which he stopped promoting opinions and switched over to being a politician? This is how it operates in politics. First of all you want to realise principles. The problem is that your political party has certain criteria, priorities, and so you find yourself involved in *realpolitik*. Bruno Latour says that *realpolitik* is the struggle for power for its own sake and the ability to reach any compromise, even though it may not agree with your programme. This is how I would distinguish Display or tranzit. Only a minority of people operated in this country in the art sphere on the basis of *realpolitik*.

OC: During our first meetings we discussed the fact that a gallery can speak to a broader public than simply the art scene. We felt that if we concentrated our activities in one space, more and more people would begin to visit it. We had no idea that only two to six people per day would take a look.

[...]

## II. tranzit and the Creation of tranzitdisplay

VM: We'd now like to examine the convergence of Display and tranzit, but before that we'd like to ask you, Vítek, how tranzit arrived in the Czech Republic and how you came to be involved?

VH: At the start it was a corporate initiative. Sometime in 1998 or '99, Kathrin Rhomberg organised an exhibition in the Secession Building, Vienna. Erste Bank, which was sponsoring this institution, was in the process of purchasing Česká Spořitelna. Someone from the bank suggested moving the exhibition to the Czech Republic and Slovakia. And being a farsighted person, Kathrin said she didn't think it was a good idea to move a project intended for the Austrian environment across the border, but that perhaps they could come up with a better idea. So she and Mária Hlavajová, who was the co-curator of Manifesta in Ljubljana, wrote

a project outline, the aim of which was to establish something similar to the Viennese Secession in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, i.e., an artistic organisation that would be detached from the mainstream and would operate as an experimental association, with its own budget and administration. They sketched out the framework and then invited Vladimír Beskid and me to draw in the details.

VM: Why you?

VH: They probably invited me because of the retrospective of the sixties that I was at that time putting on titled *Action Word Movement Space*. As far as Vladimír is concerned, that would have been on the basis of a recommendation from Roman Ondák, with whom they were in contact.

JS: So originally it was an Austro-Slovak-Czech initiative?

VH: Yes, though nothing happened in Austria, because Erste was supporting Secession. What's more, in Austria there were many different banking and other foundations for the support of culture.

JS: And this initiative already went by the name of tranzit?

VH: Yes. We created a civic association, and Mária and Kathrin even advised us on who should sit on the committee, specifically that Jiří Ševčík and Tomáš Pospiszyl should be part of it.

VM: Holding what functions?

VH: Members of the association. So tranzit came into being artificially.

JS: How did tranzit operate before you joined forces with Display?

VH: Vladimír and I tried to inject specific content into the general framework of a "platform for contemporary art." It was interesting in that nobody was telling us what to do. From the very start the rule was that people from the bank couldn't interfere in the programme. To begin with, I didn't think it would work, but the fact is that nobody made any attempt to intervene in what we were doing with tranzit. Up until the time we joined forces with Display, we had been involved in nothing but production: we had handed out grants, published books, occasionally organised exhibitions, lectures, etc., but always in premises owned by someone else.

TS: Our first contact with tranzit was when we applied for a grant. Our project was called

*Projekt.or*, and we requested funding for data-projectors. A projector which nowadays costs six thousand back in those days cost fifty, which was well beyond our possibilities. Tranzit gave us the money for two projectors.

**ZB:** The convergence of Display and tranzit wasn't completely simple. In 2006, we were evicted from our premises in Holešovice because we had a poorly written contract with the district council. The contract was for an indefinite period of time, and either party could serve notice without giving reasons. We had two months to wind up all the gallery's activities. We had been there five years, and we were exhausted. The cycle of exhibitions was constantly repeating, and we were wondering what to do with Display, because there was pressure on us to change, to try and make it as a commercial gallery, to change the framework of exhibitions or to do something completely different. Being booted out prodded us into action, and we began talks with Vítek. As opposed to 2001, this time round we wanted to create a strong base for exhibitions, where both tranzit and Display could coexist. We weren't thinking of any kind of merger. We were also in talks with Dan Merta, who was desperately looking to relocate from the Fragner Gallery. We thought about joining forces and finding a new place to hold exhibitions, but in the end nothing came of it. For a year we looked for premises, and during that year we began to meet more and more people from tranzit, specifically with Vítek, Tomáš Vaněk, Tomáš Pospiszyl and Jiří Ševčík, and to hold talks in the capacity of two civic associations. For us the merger was a pragmatic decision, because we were exhausted, not only in terms of content but also financially. We hadn't made any money whatsoever from Display.

**TS:** Vít had already begun curating exhibitions for Display.

**JS:** So tranzit was up and running for four years before merging with Display. Vítek, did you see this as another logical step? Had you started to feel that tranzit needed its own premises in the form of a gallery?

**VH:** Tranzit had a very pleasant *modus operandi*. You had an office, and you produced things. You weren't concerned with hardware. You simply looked after the things that interested you. However, over time it became tiring to be constantly changing premises, cooperating with different structures. There was no possibility of changing the existing rules and creating a longer-term or more flexible artistic

and curatorial structure. The aim behind our collaboration was to create a stable space where this would be possible.

**VM:** I'd like to ask about the role played by David Kulhánek, who came across in the old Display as an important person as far as the overall concept was concerned. I always had the feeling that he was writing most of the press releases.

**TS:** You were right.

**VM:** He also participated in the creation of the space in Dittrichova Street, where we are sitting right now, after which his collaboration with tranzitdisplay ended.

**ZB:** From the very start it was clear who would be the director or chairman of Display, and that was David, because he had written most of the theoretical texts. I felt that we would have a more background role as members of the civic association, while Vít and David would work in tandem until we transferred over to a new system. That was the plan, and David participated in the creation of this space. But then he decided to do something completely different. He wrote us a letter setting forth his reasons and moved to Prachatic, where he works outside the sphere of contemporary art. It was a purely personal decision.

**JS:** So it wouldn't be true to say there was a difference in opinion between him and you or Vítek?

**TS:** No.

### III. Monument to Transformation, Manifesta, and the Current Situation

[...]

**JS:** Tranzit was [invited to participate in Manifesta 8, in Murcia, Spain (2010)] as a regional group?

**ZB:** I think we were invited as tranzit Prague, and we expanded the invitation to tranzit as a whole. And so the curatorial team comprised the two of us along with Dóra Hegyi from Hungary, Boris Ondreička from Slovakia, and Georg Schöllhammer from Austria.

**VH:** I've always been fascinated in realising initiatives that at first sight appear nonsensical and impossible. I firmly believe that theory must be verified in practice. Our idea for Manifesta was simple. We wanted to create an autonomous whole or collective. We formed an attachment to certain assumptions using which such a whole could be established, for instance, when communities systematically attempt to

create groups in accordance with utopian, socially alternative ideas. We wanted to turn this into reality, to put on an exhibition that would develop from certain declamatory ideas created in a collective. This means they would not be the ideas of the curators but of a collective of artists and curators. I have always felt that there exists a gap between what we declare we are doing and what we are actually doing. Often this related to curators. There are many expository texts regarding exhibitions. But when you compare text and exhibition, you realise there is a disconnect involved on the level of the transfer of the idea into reality, the movement from intention to realisation. But we are labourers in this operation, and we have a certain influence on it. We have to take matters into our own hands if we are not to be ridiculous and pass the buck. For us the basic thing was to apply the considerations of political philosophy to reality—the transfer of joint ideas is legitimised only on condition that we make ourselves understood; we are able to formulate rules, to create a *constitution* and to decide on what basis and how decisions are to be reached within the framework of the community.

**OC:** From this point of view did you regard *Manifesta* as a success?

**ZB:** On a personal level it was, though the question is whether it was successful from the outside, because the entire process of preparation, which lasted nine months, was not in any way visible during the exhibition itself. To all intents and purposes, it looked like a normal exhibition. The process of creating a joint constitution of community life in accordance with the declaration exhibited was not apparent. For us it was a success because it had involved a very intensive experience with work on that scale. For me personally, the most significant experience was the confrontation with the machinery of *Manifesta*, the functional apparatus that creates exhibitions. When Vitek spoke of labourers of the art world, that really was the feeling you had there, because our collective desire flew in the face of the entire system, which was almost impossible to break. Many times we considered cancelling the project, because this system in itself was in contradistinction to our intentions as a collective. There were endless conflicts between the system and our collective intention. From this point of view you could say that the project was not a success.

**TS:** But the idea of the constitution was also delayed in arriving.

**ZB:** We came up with the idea of a constitution about a month or two after we had contacted the selected artists, and we invited them quite a long time prior to the exhibition itself. They told us they couldn't believe we meant it seriously. They thought that a bunch of curators had come up with yet another concept and that it would go no further.

**OC:** You couldn't persuade the artists that you weren't using them as chessmen in a kind of game?

**VH:** They said, "We're not going to be puppets in your game involving a constitution. We're not here in order to lend our seal of approval to your ideas of freedom." And this, of course, is a completely legitimate reaction.

**VM:** What is it like to create a constitution along with people you chose yourselves in advance? It's a pretty atypical community.

**ZB:** For us it was one big experiment. Each time we took a step forward, we realised that it was too late, that we should have thought it through a long time before. Except we couldn't think it through until we'd tried it. And that was how things were the whole time, we were always one step behind ourselves.

**VH:** All you can say is, "I'm sorry, it only occurred to me later." The original idea was to write a constitution. We gave up on that one. Then there was a radical proposal that the constitution come into being in the form of a spontaneous soirée, which would be the performative articulation of the unwritten constitution. It would come into being as a performance without dramaturgy, which itself would be the constitution. Kodwo Eshun titled it "burning of the constitution": subjects would be performed, which would represent themselves but within the framework of a theatrical situation. We fully expected chaos to ensue; nothing else seemed possible.

**JS:** So the text that was published in the *Notebook* is a description of the path to the constitution? It was written ex post?

**VH:** The text was written prior to the performance and was written at a time when we still hoped that it would be possible to write a constitution. However, nothing got written, and the performance was the only outcome. Everyone who agreed to participate exhibited something, and the performance came into being as a distant echo of the compositions of Cornelius Cardew—a kind of total freedom of interpretation on the part of individual subjects, which

developed on the basis of an awareness of the failure of communitarian articulation. And so the individual participants consciously subordinated themselves—at least at the beginning of the performance—to a kind of sketch of a dramaturgy.

**JS:** How does tranzitdisplay operate these days? There is a lecture hall below, and many events don't take the form of an exhibition. A good few discussion evenings are held here. What structure do you follow, and what do you think the future holds? Should tranzitdisplay be more and more a space for discussions to the detriment of the gallery?

**VH:** There are two dramaturgical lines here. One involves exhibitions, which are prepared a long time in advance, because they are more demanding. The other involves projections, debates, discussions, which we have called "Work." Both lines run in parallel and sometimes link up to each other. This gives us the freedom to react to something immediately that captures our attention.

**JS:** Do you think this dual approach offers something specific to the artistic community?

**ZB:** We are searching for a form in which to illustrate or formulate something. The format of an exhibition is static and we have extensive experience with it. That's why we invite artists, for instance, who shake up established ways of doing things or look for new ways of doing things. I don't know if the long-term aim is to transform the gallery into something different. We thought up the format "Work," which seemed to us to be the most appropriate and best formulated, but this could change completely over the next few years. Maybe tranzitdisplay will lose the character of a gallery or, on the contrary, will lose the discursive element. We are constantly reacting to what is going on here and now, how we perceive it, and how the general public perceives it.

**VH:** I see two themes here. One is translocality. We are all globalized, and the local needs to be translated into the global and vice versa. This is actually an old idea pursued by Display, when it exhibited artists from abroad. A more sophisticated term for this is "translocal strategy." We are constantly encountering translations, and we are ourselves part of translations. Every Czech artist who exhibits has to face the extent to which their work is local and the extent to which it is global. We want to demonstrate the

idea of a certain translocality and exhibit people from outside Europe, from the Third World. The second theme is the idea of contemporary historicization, i.e., the examination and reformulation of the historical backdrop to the contemporary, and the active relationship of the present to the past.

**JS:** And what about the remains of the original Display? How does it view its role in the current tranzitdisplay?

**ZB:** We have a certain internal structure. I'm chairman of Display, and Vitek is the representative of tranzit. The two of us propose a programme within the framework of both civic associations, which jointly comprise the tranzitdisplay committee. We communicate with the entire committee regarding the programme, though recently this has involved visions rather than a programme: visions of how to transform tranzitdisplay. The concept of "Work" arose collectively at joint meetings.

**TS:** It's similar to the start of Display. Someone would be involved to a greater or lesser extent in the case of each project, and so the role of the respective actors arose naturally. A month ago there was a weekend meeting, at which we spent two days resolving what to do with this space, how to behave toward it and what would interest us. Everyone is included on a conceptual level, though the executive is obviously more visible.

**OC:** Since the merger I've been very inactive, but I really identify with tranzitdisplay. I have loads of ironic and critical reservations, but I draw from this intellectual environment in everything I do, and I don't feel that this represents a kind of theft. At a meeting in the lead-up to Christmas, Zbyněk and I were commenting on the fact that we don't see each other as often as we used to when the original Display was still going and we were twenty-five. And yet tranzitdisplay hasn't disappeared off my radar. There's a kind of part gangster, part intellectual syndrome involved: you were part of something for a certain time and you still feel part of it, even in the activities in which you are now involved elsewhere.

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3





PATIENTS AND SURVIVORS

Some patients have strange, phantasmagoric ideas about either the shape or surface of their own bodies. For example, they may perceive the others to be careful and not to touch themselves in the armpits because of the risk of infection from their bodies. Do not let this alone, now patient told me, as that I do not unwittingly injure you when turning in the chair.

Others perceive themselves so fragile, that they can not bear even a hand shake or casual touch when walking between people. They are afraid of steel and have the fixed idea that even a conventional gate can cause their injury.

A patient who had to recently undergo a heart surgery confided to me that he feared that he will not sit in the surgery room. Here at the moment it is still possible, he continued, here I can pull out my arm from the window and lay down in the garden when I feel tight in here, but in the surgery room, at the moment, with the window closed, I am quite afraid. I do not want to exaggerate or boast but when I am in a good sleep I can fill the whole room of my existence, the whole left side, with my existence, perhaps not too soon.



3

# **Working in and on the Archive**



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# Introduction

DAVID JOSELIT

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**Archives are not merely storehouses for documents—although institutions called “archives” typically do perform that function.** For Michel Foucault, the will to accumulate everything in archives—“to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes”—is a fundamentally modern impulse.<sup>1</sup> It embodies the dream of collapsing diverse and even discrepant times into a single but internally divided space—what Foucault calls a heterotopia. Indeed, archives extract and reconfigure data drawn from a wide range of sources (humans, machines, institutions, and sometimes even the earth itself), which are then standardized and classified, whether in a system of file folders or through digitization and search algorithms. These procedures make information retrievable—or in today’s parlance, “searchable,” and thus available for new uses by new authors. A National Security Agency (NSA) archive, for instance, can be used to track the actions of American and foreign citizens or, in its publication in the *Guardian* newspaper via Edward Snowden’s releases, it can reframe global norms and expectations of privacy, and remap the internal and external boundaries of civil society. In fact, as we shall see, the dialectic of self-assertion and external surveillance is at the core of contemporary archives.

Archives thus establish cycles by which information passes through stages: extraction, classification, storage, dissemination, and return. Such cycles may be described in terms of feedback, since what is produced out of the archive may always return to it, inevitably changing, if only subtly, the complexion of the whole. Let’s take the archive of The Museum of Modern Art as an example: it draws together many kinds of data, ranging from departmental records to unpublished documentation of modern and contemporary art, into a classificatory system that, taken as a whole, represents an overarching identity—namely, the institutional history of MoMA. But when this archive is used as a resource, its identity is dispersed into a multitude of projects, some that bolster MoMA’s reputation and some that are sharply critical of it, while others bypass the museum altogether. In other words, rather than telling a particular story or representing a unique institution, archives are characterized by their articulation of information’s circulation—they regulate how a document is packaged, what kind of access is afforded to it, and how this information may be reactivated.<sup>2</sup> For this reason I use the expression “information out of place” to indicate that the movement of information—its *displacement*—is what lends it meaning and power. Archives shape, channel, and control such displacements—they establish the “plasticity” or architectures of circulation. In the Eastern European cases featured in this chapter, three models of archival architecture emerge: 1) *self-historicization* as an effort among artists to recuperate unofficial practices that were neither supported nor documented by official arts bureaucracies or the art market (which was largely nonexistent in those places); 2) *surveillance*,

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1 — Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 26.

2 — For a theoretical discussion of the archive as an actor, with reference to Foucault’s account of archives in

*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, see André Lepecki, “The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances,” *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 28–48, esp. 37–38.

undertaken by secret police in order to follow citizens—including artists—under suspicion for transgressions of various sorts and simulated in various ways by artists themselves; 3) *utopian archives* that imagine art practices in inaccessible locations in space and time, as an expression of alternate futures.

In coining the term “self-historicization,” Zdenka Badovinac argued that artists working outside the Western canon saw the necessity of establishing histories of unofficial or underground art activities in order to gain access to the global art world. That is to say that the very existence of modern or contemporary art is endangered unless historicized, and that access to the canon (or merely recognition beyond a tiny group of insiders) can only be achieved through entry into discourse, which is much easier to accomplish for Westerners than for their counterparts elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Artists’ archives, then, such as Lia Perjovschi’s Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis, occupy a distinctive position, since their legitimacy is not “guaranteed” by official institutionalization but rather by “borrowing” the status of the artwork, which the archive both engulfs and displaces. This elision of artwork and archive enables different modes of circulation from those of conventional archives, since, for instance, a work of art may occupy the galleries of a museum instead of its basement storeroom or library. Badovinac cautions, however, that self-historicization is double-edged in its production of an “Eastern European” identity that may be—in fact was perhaps invented to be—consumed in the contemporary global art world. She writes, “In modernization we see a double process. It is, simultaneously, both a possible means of achieving independence and a key method for new forms of colonialism.”

Such a double edge is also apparent in the second archival format I mentioned—that of surveillance. Here two kinds of ontological insecurity arise. The first has to do with the contradiction between a person’s “internal” experience of identity and the external *profile* that may be compiled on him or her by the police, leading to a scission between private and public personas that is a common trope among the artists under consideration here. Closely related is an epistemological doubt around what constitutes objectivity, or evidence, in the first place—in other words, how can one really know from a grainy surveillance photograph what a subject is thinking and why she is acting in the way she is? As Tomáš Pospiszyl argues with regard to the performances of Jiří Kovanda, in which the artist had himself photographed performing modest and sometimes absurd actions in public spaces, the meaning of such ostensible “evidence” is subject to diverse and even contradictory interpretations just like works of art. He writes:

*Two types of hidden scenarios were thus being played out concurrently in Prague’s public spaces: one led by the secret police, the other by unofficial artists. Even though they were based on completely different motivations, their photographs and accompanying texts show a number of similarities. We first have to learn to read the secret police records, just like the language of postwar art [. . .] Many of those who were being photographed by the secret police knew that they were being followed. They modified their behaviour to prevent being persecuted or to confuse the police in different ways.*

3 — Foucault makes this point in describing what he calls “museum paintings.” See Michel Foucault, “Fantasia of the Library,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and*

*Interviews* by Michel Foucault, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 87–109.

Pospiszyl's observation that a person's behavior is affected by her awareness of being photographed calls into question the very premise of documentation's veracity, introducing a performative dimension, which André Lepecki has theorized as the body's capacity to function as a living archive.<sup>4</sup> What Kovanda's work demonstrates, according to Pospiszyl's interpretation, is that there is a feedback loop between bodies and their becoming evidence, or becoming a "profile." The process of documentation is a performative (if largely implicit) negotiation—a kind of secret struggle—over how one will take one's place in an archive.

If, as I have posited, archives are mechanisms for putting information out of place, each of the two archival architectures I have discussed thus far exhibits its own form of displacement. Self-historicization puts the archive in the place of the artwork, and thereby accrues a range of advantages and meaning-effects. Surveillance, on the other hand, whether as an authoritarian tactic or an aesthetic strategy, displaces both the experience of subjectivity and the nature of evidence through feedback loops of representation. Július Koller's Ganek Gallery belongs to the third, utopian, category of archival architecture I have enumerated. While fictional, the gallery's stated location is an actual protruding shelf or platform on a remote mountainside in the High Tatras in Slovakia. But as Daniel Grúň puts it, "The only medium where the Ganek Gallery functioned and grew over time was the artist's personal archive." This archive includes both press and touristic materials relating to the Tatras Mountains, as well as fantastical projections through drawings and collages, such as the levitation of the mountain ledge. Indeed, the Ganek Gallery was part of Koller's longstanding project the Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations (U.F.O.), and thus the fictional gallery is not only premised on physical dislocation, but also a temporal displacement (onto an imagined future). In terms of both space and time, then, the Ganek Gallery is literally utopian.

The three models of archival architecture I have described here are aimed at three different procedures for putting information out of place: an entry into discourse through self-historicization; debates over what counts as evidence through actual and simulated surveillance; and the utopian capacity to occupy multiple spatiotemporal locations. Each of these efforts has real power- and meaning-effects, especially but not exclusively in the Eastern European context. Historicization affords a global profile, which leads both to greater visibility and a risk of cultural commodification; debates over the truth-effects of images can support political claims among subordinated groups (such as women and LGBTQ people) and resistance to authoritarian power more broadly; and imagining utopias allows one to project alternatives to actually existing social and political conditions. The archival artwork is a *plural* entity that establishes a mechanism for producing infinite representations as opposed to a singular accomplished artwork. As Jacques Derrida has influentially argued, the "question of the archive is not [...] a question of the past [...] It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow."<sup>5</sup> It offers a strategy for artists beyond the West to enter into art markets and art history by establishing the aesthetic and discursive world from which their work emerges. In general, it is well suited to global conditions, where to adequately comprehend contemporary visual culture, we must resituate art within the multitude of images that condition its circulation—its past, present, and *future*.

4 — See Lepecki, "The Body as Archive."

5 — Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

# Summary of Critical Texts

MICHELLE ELLIGOTT

**The past few decades have seen an unprecedented interest in the archive by both** practitioners and scholars of contemporary art: as theoretical framework, material for creative activities, and as source for historical research. While this phenomenon occurs in many regions and contexts across the globe, in the case of Central and Eastern Europe, the archive assumes a distinctly unique and vital position. In certain countries where experimental art practices were not able to freely thrive, due to varying degrees of governmental repression, the archive provided a venue and validation for creative expression. Furthermore, the creation, use, and custodianship of archives fell largely outside of the realm of museums or other formal institutions, so direct engagement with the archive was open to the artists themselves.

Zdenka Badovinac introduces this idea by focusing on places outside the canonized history, or “interrupted spaces.” In these spaces, artists adopted the role of self-historicizing, collecting documentation relating to their locally and contextually specific situation, and performed as archivists, curators, and historians. As Badovinac noted, “These are smaller, fragmented systems that map the national histories outside of any broader international connections—or they map the little histories of individuals and groups that shape the unofficial mythologies of the given spaces.”

Several other authors take up the theme of self-historicization. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez provides an overview of this artistic strategy that is distinctive of Central and Eastern European institutional critique. In Romania, Lia Perjovschi resisted the authoritarian regime by gathering research materials on international art and later amassed her Contemporary Art Archive, an open, living archive whose objective is sharing and teaching. By working specifically with the construction of its own context, the collective of Slovenian artists IRWIN developed its decentralized, contributive *East Art Map* to expose this diverse and expanded view of the art of our time.

Daniel Grůň provides a detailed account of Slovak artist Július Koller’s Ganek Gallery, a speculative and fictional project as part of Koller’s Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations (U.F.O.), designed to be tolerant of creative practices and to communicate via alternative means with unknown civilizations, both on earth and extra-terrestrial. The fictive program can only be understood through the documentation the artist meticulously maintained, and as Grůň argues, with this approach standing as “a kind of counter-model of the institution, self-archiving manifests itself as a political strategy.”

The Romanian artist group subREAL writes of their engagement with the *Arta* magazine photographic archive in the context of the socialist state. As the official publication concerning the Romanian art scene between 1953 and 1989, the magazine visually documented sanctioned art forms. subREAL also addresses the Romanian Securitate secret-police archives, and with these collections discusses the framing and reframing of history and the ethics of access or barriers to the archive.

The role of communist secret-police photographs is also noted by Tomáš Pospiszyl in his consideration of the work of Czech artist Jiří Kovanda. Ironically, the documentation of Kovanda’s performances appears eerily similar to photographs taken from everyday surveillance of suspected individuals.

State surveillance likewise informed the work of Ryszard Kisiel and his friends, who in 1985–86 staged photographic sessions in a private home, creating a body of work in a DIY aesthetic of some three hundred color slides of men in various nude and simulated sex scenes. In response to the “Hyacinth” action, a large-scale operation of Polish secret agents informing on homosexuals, the images of Kisiel present an act of defiance, while ironically at the same time employing the very medium of secret-police surveillance. The queering of the archive allows for an understanding of the archive as a space for subculture and the underground. Karol Radziszewski plumbs this archive in his art project *Kisieland*, which attempts to recuperate this history and connect it to the contemporary understanding of homosexual culture in the former communist bloc.

Sven Spieker interprets the grid of suspended strings and the bits of garbage that hang from them in Russian artist Ilya Kabakov’s installation *Sixteen Ropes* of 1984 as an archive, with the grid being the repository and the trash the material it stores, the two inexorably linked. Further, he suggests that the work of Ukrainian artist Boris Mikhailov presents “an archive that constitutes itself only as part of the viewer’s interaction with it,” or determinate upon a set of relations.

The diverse texts assembled here reveal the multiple approaches to working in and on the archive that coexist in the region. From self-archiving as a strategy to engage creative practice or identity politics, to the complexities of state secret-police archives, to (sometimes fictive) archives as a mode of artistic practice, the archive has played a key role in the recent art of Central and Eastern Europe. No longer tucked away in the realm of private practice, the archive is increasingly out, becoming publicly acknowledged and accepted, as is evidenced by the embrace of the archive by major museums in Brno, Moscow, Warsaw, Wrocław, and Zagreb, all of which foreground and engage a politics of the archive.

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## Conversation

ZOFIA KULIK WITH DAVID SENIOR

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**DAVID SENIOR: In your studies or in your early practice, were there any models or experiences that shaped your attitude about the possible function of an archive or the importance of the document in the context of changing art practices?**

**ZOFIA KULIK:** The question about my experience with an archive leads me to my pre-archive practice. Then, I would talk instead about “collecting.” It started when I was around eleven or twelve years old. It was quite popular in the ’50s to collect photos of actresses (not actors) from weekly magazines, and I was very patient and persistent in that. I had a few A3 exercise books where I pasted pale images (the quality of the prints was not very good). Unfortunately, once they got wet and I had to throw them out. Later, in my sculptural studies, the notion of “preservation” appeared. If you work in clay, a plastic material, then its transformations are natural, and the will or necessity to document changes (a task from the professor) is also natural.





Zofia Kulik. *KwieKulik, Activities with Dobromierz (Działania z Dobromierzem)*. 1972–74.  
Photographic print digitized in 2008, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

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**DS: When KwieKulik began organizing an archive for your process-based art practices and also the work of colleagues, was it instigated by a pragmatic need to simply give order to materials that had accumulated from your practice and your collaborations, or was it more part of the original conceptual framing of the work itself? In other words, was the idea of the archive inseparable, in your conception, from the consideration of the work itself?**

**ZK:** Giving order to materials was never the main aim for us. We used the archive as a “bank” of images, scenarios, quotations, and ideas, and depending on the occasion, we would make a selection—for new arrangements as well as references for new actions. Using old materials in a new way caused new documentation to come into being. That means a new level of complication appeared with many links to past actions. Today, sometimes it is difficult to separate one event from another. It is also difficult to pinpoint which version of public “being” was original. The archive seemed to be for us similar to clay—a plastic structure easily transformed and rearranged. In our theory, we used the term “directed documentation.”

**DS: As you developed your own “institution,” the Studio of Activities, Documentation and Propagation [PDDiU], was the founding of an archive in your apartment an effort to fill a void, to correct the neglect of official art institutions in terms of documenting the practices of certain contemporary artists of the time? Was your labor in accumulating materials a response to an understanding that it would not be preserved otherwise in state institutions?**

**ZK:** Exactly, yes. We had a deep conviction that something important would be lost if it was not “captured” by a camera or tape recorder, or at least immediately noted. Poland was a country with little material heritage following various uprisings and wars, especially after World War II. Additionally, after 1945, many names and facts from the past were forbidden to be mentioned in public. So, in our case, documentation was a weapon against permanent “discontinuity” in art history.

**DS: As an organization, is it fair to summarize the PDDiU as a method you used to manifest opposition to the existing political and social environment and the institutional bureaucracy of that environment?**

**ZK:** Yes and no. We did not plan to manifest any opposition. Yet that is what happened. We never wanted to be underground; we wanted the PDDiU to be a public place. As it turned out, our fight for that project produced documentation, which portrayed that moment and our environment very well. The history of PDDiU is now the subject of research and study. But for me it does not produce pleasant memories. You must know that if you fight with bureaucracy, you create your own. When I recollect all those letters, complaints, meetings, and expectations, even now I feel exhausted.

**DS: During the 1970s, KwieKulik was in a fairly constant dialogue with various state bodies in Poland with regard to potential funding for your activities—though the funding never materialized. Part of your practice involved this kind of attempt to get inside the state apparatus, even after you had been blacklisted by the Party in the late 1970s. In retrospect, could you imagine how the archive would have functioned if somehow it had been included under some state body and supervision?**



zk: I think, and Paweł Kwiek probably would not agree with me, our archive could not be included by any state or institutional body, not only because of the politics of that “body” but also because of our basic concept and practice. What I said before, we treated the archive as a palette for building still new “entities” (compositions, arrangements, presentation sets, and so on). What institution would agree to such creative but unpredictable use of the archival “stock”?

**ds: Your practice in the last decades has continued to involve these processes of building and maintaining archives. For example, a work like *From Siberia to Cyberia* [1999] involved amassing a huge amount of images to create a major composition, and you have maintained the KwieKulik materials for exhibition and reinterpretation. How has this labor of archiving changed for you over time? How have the historical materials from the KwieKulik period shifted in their substance or meaning as you have gone through major projects like the excellent monograph on your archive that was published in 2012?**

zk: In these questions I see also the question about my role in the KwieKulik duo. Other questions arise. Would any archive have existed if it were not Kwiek or not Kulik? Would the archive, as it was left by us around 1987 when we stopped our collaboration, be a public fact today if I did not labor on it during the last eight or nine years? Should I be unhappy that when I work on the archive I am not making my individual works? What does “individual work” even mean for me today? Should I sign my “reinterpretations” of KwieKulik materials with my name? Is it possible to “cultivate” two different biographies at the same time? (It is not simply a continuation.) My answers to these questions have not stabilized yet. I feel like a nurse for the KwieKulik achievement, and my later individual work is for me like a partner. Now I spend more time with the “patient” than with my partner.

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# Interrupted Histories

ZDENKA BADOVINAC

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[...]

## Parallel Histories

When we speak of the official history of the West, we are aware that in the Western world there has always existed, in parallel, much that has been marginalized or afterwards erased and forgotten. We are aware that today, even in the West, the number of subordinate histories is multiplying and that fewer and fewer people can identify with the unified collective narrative, which, as we increasingly discover, is linked to an imaginary community. As Homi Bhabha points out, in a period of time-space compression, hybridity replaces feelings of national and personal identity. In his view, today's archetypal figure is the migrant, who lives between different cultural spaces. Despite the elusiveness of the identity of the migrant, this nevertheless appears as a universally recognizable category.

Earlier, when discussing the expression "collective identity," I said that its meaning essentially depends on the individual social and political context. I could say something similar about the term "parallel histories": it is used differently in different contexts. It varies substantially depending on which official history the little histories are parallel to. There exist, indeed, enormous differences between the dominant systems and their relations with subordinate systems. In regard to the dominant Western system of art, we can say with certainty that it has always been much more flexible toward its marginal histories, which it has even been able to graft fairly quickly into the big history. The unofficial art that existed under the more rigid forms of communism, however, represents a different story; it attained legitimacy, for the most part, only after the collapse of the regime. One of the essential features of art in spaces dominated by ideological art was its inherent parallelism. If, then, we today wish to develop in these spaces an art history that would be at all relevant, we must take into consideration the fact that there were always two entirely separate parallel currents—official and unofficial. The unofficial art was the only truly parallel art, in that it never intersected with the official art. If we consider the full meaning of the word "parallel," then we must distinguish between *parallel* histories and *subordinate* histories. Of

the latter we can say that they are historical lines that synchronously form the networks of a system in which they continuously appear and disappear, interrupting and transforming each other. Subordinate histories are characteristic of all spaces and—at least in those with which our exhibition is concerned—also imply an art that is subordinate to the art of the dominant political, ethnic, or religious communities and, in some places, subordinate also to the art of a diaspora or the art of the West. In short, we can speak of a system of interrupted histories, which would seem to be, for now, something negative that should be brought to an end. But despite such desires, interruption is in fact the only constant we can find in various times and places.

It would be a mistake to think that, with the collapse of the political regimes and the rapid acceleration of the processes of global integration, things would somehow automatically normalize, that interrupted histories would be done away with and art would organize itself as part of a system of continuities. On the contrary, after the fall of the communist regime, just when we expected a great wave of normalization, new interruptions appeared. Today we are witnessing, for example, amnesia about the communist past—but this is not amnesia about the degeneration of communism, but rather about the progressive humanist idea, which suddenly found itself erased from the public space. This contemporary interruption was possible, among other reasons, because of the existing tradition of the truly radical interruptions that had resulted also in the creation of parallel systems.

## Mapping Interrupted Histories

We have stated that art history, in the sense of a unified collective narrative, exists only in the West and that other spaces are, by and large, spaces of interrupted histories. In this regard, interrupted histories are in fact individual stories that live separate lives from one another and that cannot be joined together, on the basis of unified standards, into a larger meaningful whole. These are smaller, fragmented systems that map the national histories outside of any broader international connections—or they map the little histories of individuals and groups that shape the unofficial mythologies of the given spaces.



Chto Delat. *Angry Sandwich-People, or In Praise of Dialectics* (Разгневанные люди-бутерброды или похвала диалектики). 2006. Video (color, sound), 8 min. Courtesy the artists and KOW Berlin

One such system is the self-historicizing of artists who, lacking a suitable collective history, were themselves forced to search for their own historical and interpretive contexts. Because the local institutions that should have been systematizing neo-avant-garde art and its tradition either did not exist or were disdainful of such art, the artists themselves were forced to be their own art historians and archivists, a situation that still exists in some places today. Such self-historicization includes the collecting and archiving of documents, whether of one's own art actions or, in certain spaces, of broader movements, ones that were usually marginalized by local politics and invisible in the international art context.

Self-historicization was only one of the systems that existed alongside the activities of institutions, which themselves have always been extremely diverse in the spaces of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. They range from thoroughly provincial museums to museums with enviable collections in Russia, the former Yugoslavia, Israel, and Iran. In some places—Palestine and Lebanon, for instance—they did not exist at all; only recently have smaller non-profit art organizations begun to compensate for this absence. Nevertheless, despite all these differences in institutions, we can say that they were what, for the most part, provided local artists with a national or ideological frame, even if they had no informed relationship with either the narrower local art scene or the broader international context.

Artists today find themselves in a situation where, on the one hand, they are still to a large degree left to do their own historicizing while, on the other hand, the newly interested West has already started to include them in its museum collections—where they find themselves estranged from their own original context. Thus begins the musealization of the East, a process that Boris Groys, when speaking of the art of communism, describes as “a consequence of the West’s victory in the Cold War: we know from history that the victors always, in one way or another, appropriate the art of the vanquished.”<sup>1</sup> We have already stated that the musealization of the non-Western world essentially means classifying it and making it more manageable. The greater visibility of

the Other, then, does not automatically imply greater power. Why, therefore, should we be at all interested in modernizing our art and its system of operations if it is clear that this does not enhance our sovereignty but instead takes it away?

In modernization we see a double process. It is, simultaneously, both a possible means of achieving independence and a key method for new forms of colonialism. It is, indeed, a stimulant that, on the one hand, strengthens and, on the other, destroys. And, as with any medicine, in these processes, too, “dosage” and combination with anything of a different “chemical makeup” are essential issues.

Today’s split between tradition and modernity, which, especially in the Arab world, is becoming ever more acute, is based precisely on the understanding that these two entities are fundamentally incompatible. We have already found that, today, traditional identity essentially implies a reiteration of something that supposedly cannot change over time. If we want, today, to historicize a certain artistic space—without abandoning it to the jaws of such dichotomies—our only recourse is to recognize both the contemporary plurality of identities and the social, political, and historical specificities of individual localities. Only by taking account of both these things can we avoid both the traditional and modern reproductions of identity that are stimulated by the contemporary world of the media. We are speaking, then, of new possibilities that reside in a historicizing that no longer views identities as finalized facts but instead always allows for the discovery of yet-unlabeled subjectivities. If we want to talk about any sort of power that peripheral spaces might have for transforming the existing state of affairs, then we must look for it in this quality of being actively unlabeled.

We spoke earlier of parallel and subordinate histories—in other words, the informal histories that continue to be an especially characteristic feature of the non-Western world. In these environments, we could, indeed, speak of a whole range of informal systems, which people were compelled to develop alongside official political and military dictatorships so as to survive more easily. From the perspective of the modern world, these informal systems look like huge obstacles on the road to economic progress and the development of mature political democracy. For this reason they are usually presented as features of the Other that need to be dispensed with as soon as possible

1 — Boris Groys, “Logika zbirke” [The logic of the collection], in *Teorija sodobne umetnosti: Izbrani eseji* [Theories of contemporary art: selected essays], Zbirka Koda (Ljubljana: Studentska založba, 2002), p. 100.

for the good of modernization. In its critical stance toward the world of modernity, art today often turns to what are essentially premodern systems in which it sees a certain subjective creativity that has almost disappeared from the standardized capitalist world. In this way it views informal systems as a positive; the Other is no longer merely the object of modernization but has become an active Other. Here we are dealing not with any romantic nostalgia, but rather with a recognition of the modes of operation that, together with artifacts, compose the history of the Other.

[...]

*Interrupted Histories* presents work in which artists act as:

- archivists of their own and other artists' projects or of various phenomena in the national history;
- curators who research their own historical context and establish a comparable framework for various big and little histories;
- historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists who record current and pertinent phenomena in the interaction between tradition and modernity as well as rapid change in the local landscape.

In his essay "The Logic of the Collection," Boris Groys has written: "The museum in

modernism, despite everything, had a definite function: it represented universal history. But in recent times, the museum exposition has been losing this function, too: the most interesting curators, in compiling artworks and establishing their mutual reference, no longer behave in accordance with historical logic but rather in accordance with entirely aesthetic questions." From all that has been said, it might seem that artists and curators have exchanged roles. But the fact of the matter is simply that, today, we can no longer separate different professional roles inasmuch as we are dealing more and more with interdisciplinary phenomena.

In considering the possibilities of a new historicization, we keep returning to something that once seemed inconceivable: the interweaving of two different systems of thought—science and art. Victor Burgin once made fun of Picasso's famous boast, "I do not seek; I find." And indeed, art has never been about great moments of intuition; artists have always proceeded from investigations based on the achievements of the natural and social sciences.

[...]

Excerpted from a text originally published in Slovenian and English in *Prekinjene zgodovine/Interrupted Histories*. Edited by Zdenka Badovinac. Translated by Tamara Soban and Dean DeVos, Rawley Grau, Béata Hock, and David Riff. Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija/Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

## Étude

TOMÁŠ POSPISZYL

Several writers have already noticed the similarity between the documentation of performances by Czech artist Jiří Kovanda and the photographs taken by communist secret police of those being followed. In fact, they seem almost identical. The pictures taken by the police using hidden cameras capture the environment of the hard-line communist days of Prague of the 1970s and early 1980s. The secret agent follows an individual who cannot be visibly distinguished from the other citizens. It is only from the records that we learn that this individual, seemingly doing everyday things, is in fact committing acts against the state. Sending letters, meeting with friends in restau-

rants, or picking up visitors from the airport are later viewed as the distribution of subversive materials, gathering for counter-revolutionary reasons, or establishing contacts with foreign spies. The photograph serves here to document criminal acts, which are not apparent at first glance. It is important that the photograph capture the environment in which the act takes place, and that it include the other individuals in contact with the person followed. It is therefore necessary that the photograph contain information on the place and time, and to assure that the other people appearing in it are identified. Photography only becomes proof of the crime with the additional interpretation

KONTAKT

3. září 1979

Praha, Spálená a Vodičkova ulice



Jiří Kovanda. *Contact (Kontakt)*. 1979. Gelatin silver print, 11 $\frac{11}{16}$  × 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (29.7 × 21 cm).  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Photography Fund and Committee on  
Media and Performance Art Funds

of the captured facts, with an analysis of the entire police record. What is most important for a communist court of law is the real or fabricated intention of the acts of those being followed, and even their class or social affiliation.

Many of Kovanda's performances took place at roughly the same time and in the same places in Prague—where people were going about their everyday business. Those passing by never even expected that an artistic performance was being played out around them. Kovanda brushed against people, hid on the sidewalks for no apparent reason, or acted according to a predetermined scenario that did not differ from everyday behaviour. All of these performances were documented by a non-professional photographer. Kovanda then glued the photograph onto a piece of paper, and beneath it wrote the title of the performance, its physical location, the time it took place, and described the scenario. Only after reading this "record" is it made clear that the activity was indeed an art action. Brushing against people, hiding, and walking back and forth have become the work of an artist, and therefore we must perceive and assess them as art. Two types of hidden scenarios were thus being played out concurrently in Prague's public spaces: one led by the secret police, the other by unofficial artists. Even though they were based on completely different motivations, their photographs and accompanying texts show a number of similarities. We first have to learn to read the secret police records, just like the language of postwar art. Even though we are familiar with this language, we should be wary of it. Many of those who were being photographed by the secret police knew that they were being followed. They modified their behaviour to prevent being persecuted or to confuse the police in different ways. Kovanda knew that he was

being photographed, for he had himself invited his friend to his inconspicuous performances. Nevertheless, he acted as if he were not aware of his friend's existence.

Admittedly, these similarities and discrepancies are for the most part random. The police record was a collective product; Kovanda's documentation was part of the artist's work. Neither was originally available to the public, or if so, only shared with a select group of viewers. Even though Kovanda's work may not appear so, it was an art piece from the very outset. The possible interpretation of the police record as an artwork comes up against a number of essential limits that shift such an interpretation to the level of mere intellectual tightrope walking. The records of the communist police are still quite combustible in Eastern Europe. They continue to be perceived as evidence of individual guilt. Even though the volumes of records are composed of individual, ostensibly authentic records and reports, few people bring themselves to admit that they are, in their essence, a work of fiction in which those who were the objects of interest were viewed in advance through the deformed lens of political interest.

Kovanda himself did not derive his 1970s performances from the secret police's tactics, however. Though from today's perspective it may even seem hard to believe, he considered them to be *apolitical* and did not consciously react to the events of the day with them. Today we interpret them as individual artistic expressions that arose from the artist's inner needs, as well as an effective metaphor of personal resistance against totalitarianism. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that Jiří Kovanda's work has become so popular.

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## The Big Archive

SVEN SPIEKER

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In Ilya Kabakov's installation *Sixteen Ropes* (1984), numerous pieces of garbage dangle at regular intervals, roughly at eye level, from sixteen parallel ropes that are suspended a meter and a half from each other and the same

distance from the floor. Written labels attached to the objects by pieces of string contain text and fragments of phrases. ("Look what we took out of the library!" "We'll read it this evening.") Although it may not be immediately apparent,



*Sixteen Ropes* represents an archive. In fact, such “stringing up” of objects was one of the most ancient forms of filing, and the English word “file,” which is derived from the French *fil* (“string”), originally meant “to line something up on a piece of string.” The question posed by *Sixteen Ropes*, then, is whether its strings can deliver what archives promise us, a sense of (and in) time.

Archives contain paperwork that no longer circulates in the bureaucracy, paperwork that has lapsed and become garbage. The crux of *Sixteen Ropes* is the way in which it provides garbage in a literal sense—from cigarette butts to wrappers, scraps of paper, and railway tickets—with the archive’s formal trappings, such as strings, labels, ropes, knots, and written words, all functioning to tame the trash by turning it into documents of culture and history. The most important of the tools designed to bring about this conversion, the horizontal ropes and the vertical strings to which the labels are attached, form a three-dimensional grid on which the suspended garbage is caught. But can this formal grid sufficiently reduce the heterogeneity of the trash, its utter difference, so that a coherent story, and hence history, can emerge?

The other question Kabakov’s installation poses, a question that is perhaps even more insistent than the first and even more difficult to answer, is whether we ought to think of this grid, ideally empty and exempt from time, as preceding the trash that is caught in it, or conversely whether the garbage dangling from the ropes precedes the grid that organizes it. A third possibility [...] is that the grid and its trash, the archive and what it stores, emerge at the same time so that one cannot easily be subtracted from the other. In this archive, the objects stored and the principles that organize them are exempt neither from time nor from the presence of the spectator. Never quite selfsame, the archive oscillates between embodiment and disembodiment, composition and decomposition, organization and chaos.

Using a term from cybernetics, we could describe Kabakov’s overlaying of trash with a grid as a form of feedback.<sup>1</sup> “Feedback” describes a self-regulating system’s ability to control its output through internal control mechanisms without interrupting its activity. Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics,

famously (and problematically) extended the term to contexts that had little or nothing to do with machines, especially to the problem of historical awareness. While the East Coast American Wiener believed that the historical consciousness of New Englanders took the form of class-consciousness, he thought that in more recently settled areas such as the Midwest, historical consciousness could result only from feedback:

*When a Yankee basketmaker will show you in his shed the tools which his great grandfather forged from bog iron and which he learned to use after the custom of the Indian to split the annual rings of the red ash and make his splints, he will do so with a guileless sense of the contemporaneity of the past, which is very far removed from the pride of the New England aristocrat in his genealogy. His past lies in his barn with its bins, its tools, and its baskets.<sup>2</sup>*

In this example, the basketmaker derives feedback from the collection of family tools that alleviates his lack of historical (class) consciousness, allowing him to extend his life in a backward direction. However, crucially (and unnoticed by Wiener), this feedback has as its prerequisite not only the collected objects themselves but also the living voice of the basketmaker who shows the visitor his ancestors’ tools, matching words with things, and who guarantees the authenticity of this match through his presence in the barn.

In *Sixteen Ropes*, the living voice has been replaced by the written labels, in themselves nothing but trash, that are attached to the pieces of garbage.<sup>3</sup> These labels may imitate living voices, but they fail to connect with their objects in any meaningful way. On some labels we read what sound like written voice recordings (“and thought he would call before leaving”), sometimes in the form of an obscenity.<sup>4</sup> Where in Wiener’s example successful feedback is predicated upon the presence of

2 — Norbert Wiener, “Homeostasis in the Individual and Society,” in *Selected Papers of Norbert Wiener, Including Generalized Harmonic Analysis and Tauberian Theorems* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), 23.

3 — In another installation, *The Big Archive*, Kabakov does feed audio voices into the installation, but they are unintelligible.

4 — See Alexander Rappaport, “The Ropes of Ilya Kabakov: An Experiment in Interpretation of a Conceptual Installation,” in Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich, eds., *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 175.

1 — On possible links between the archive and cybernetics, see G. T. Guilbaud, *What Is Cybernetics?* (New York: Criterion Books, 1995), 6.

the basketmaker-collector who authoritatively connects the objects in the barn with the daily practice of which they were once a part, in Kabakov's installation the archive itself takes over the function of the basketmaker's voice, refracting it into myriads of more or less incoherent written labels that fail resoundingly to connect words with things. The switch inherent in this operation—from the living voice to the archival medium of writing—makes all the difference. Where in Wiener's example the differences among the collected objects are sublated, tamed, neutralized through living commentary, the absence of such a voice from Kabakov's written labels throws their cacophonous difference into even greater relief. Visually, the archive's failure to establish what Wiener calls historical consciousness manifests itself in the fact that the ropes and strings do such a poor job of alleviating the overwhelming impression of messiness and disorder created by the installation.

Traditionally the records stored in archives fulfilled a legal function. However, over time archives changed from being legal depositories to being institutions of historical research. By the end of the nineteenth century, finally, the archive had morphed into a hybrid institution based in public administration and historical research alike: "There was often talk of the archives' Janus head, a head with two faces of which one looks to the administration and the other to research, and it was and still is a matter for debate where the emphasis should come to lie."<sup>5</sup> As they enter the archive, the papers of which offices rid themselves are resurrected as sources that historians consult in their efforts to write history. From the historian's point of view, these papers stand as quasi-objective correlatives of the living past.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than endorsing the efficacy of the archive's transformational powers—garbage into culture—*Sixteen Ropes* dramatizes its resounding failure, as Kabakov's archive fails to establish a sense of history—understood as

an orderly succession of events—due to failing feedback. Instead of turning into correlatives of history, the items in the installation remain what they are, garbage. In no small degree this failure stems from the fact that Kabakov's archive collects quite literally everything. When an archive has to collect everything, because every object may become useful in the future, it will soon succumb to entropy and chaos. Wiener stressed that there are cases when feedback does not produce a higher degree of stability but, on the contrary, leads to chaos. In such cases the system begins to swing back and forth so violently that it finally collapses. This, precisely, is the state of affairs dramatized in *Sixteen Ropes*, a state of entropy that symbolizes, more generally, the archive's precarious position between order and chaos, between organization and disorder, between the presence of the voice and the muteness of objects.

[...]

In formerly Communist Eastern Europe, where (photo) archives frequently functioned as the clerical outlets of a near-ubiquitous apparatus of optical and acoustic surveillance and control, the (official) archive, similarly, was not at the service of memory. Rather it served as a tool for widespread repression and collective amnesia. Few artists from the former eastern bloc have analyzed the (photo) archive in this context as thoroughly as Ukrainian-born Boris Mikhailov. His work as a photographer is inflected, first, by the pervasive social and political repression in the former Soviet Union and, second, by the halting and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to rid the country of this legacy that characterized the mid-1980s. Mikhailov has commented:

*In the history of photography in our country we don't have photos of the famine in the Ukraine in the 1930s, when several million people died and corpses were lying around in the streets. We don't have photos of the war, because journalists were forbidden to take pictures of sorrow threatening the moral spirit of the Soviet people; we don't have non-"lacquered" pictures of enterprises, nor pictures of street events, except demonstrations. The entire photography history is "dusted." And we have the impression that each person with a camera is a "spy."<sup>7</sup>*

5 — Gerhart Enders, *Archivverwaltungslehre*

(Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1967), 17.

6 — In *Against Architecture*, Dennis Hollier argues that Georges Bataille's efforts as a writer were directed against precisely this type of waste disposal. For Bataille, Hollier reasons, "philosophy's special domain is the trash can of science. Philosophers, science's garbage men, eliminate or recuperate its refuse, reducing it to nothing or boiling it down to sameness." Dennis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 88. The archive I invoke in this book is in the same business of disposing of what falls between its system's cracks. Kabakov's installation dramatizes this recuperative activity—and its utter failure.

7 — Boris Mikhailov, *Case History* (Zurich: Scalco, 1999), 7.

*Unfinished Dissertation* (1984–85)—an album of photographs that oscillates between the repressive amnesia of the public archive and the intense memory that characterizes the private (photo) collection—contains snapshots that Mikhailov began to take randomly in his native city of Kharkov in the mid-1980s and then arranged in pairs of two, gluing them on single leaves of coarse typing paper that are said to contain, on their reverse side, a (now invisible) anonymous dissertation. To these pages Mikhailov added handwritten notes that mix personal reflections with quotations from art, philosophy, literature, and science.

One of the more striking elements of Mikhailov's archive is its formal emphasis on repetition and differentiation, suggesting an approach to the archive that is structural rather than semantic. It is tempting to treat the paired photographs of the individual panels of *Unfinished Dissertation* as minimal pairs that function like the minimal distinctions in Roman Jakobson's elaboration of the structure of language. To Jakobson, English root words such as "bill" and "pull"—where the difference is to be found in the two words' initial sounds—can be broken down into distinctive fractions that can in their turn be broken down further: "Upon perceiving syllables such as *bill* and *pull*, the listener recognizes them as two different words distinguishable by their initial part /bi/ and /pu/ respectively."<sup>8</sup> Like Jakobson's minimal distinctions, the two photographs on the panels that make up *Unfinished Dissertation* seem to be binary, which is to say that what makes them a pair is the difference that separates them. However, the differences typical of Mikhailov's images do not show the same degree of symmetry as Jakobson's minimal pairs. In Jakobson's examples, both words have the same length and phonetic structure except for one single element. By contrast, in *Unfinished Dissertation* the multiple differences between the individual photographs are strictly asymmetrical. In [one panel], for example, the upper image has a vertical, meandering line, a detail that is missing from the lower image. In contrast to the historical view of photography as the most archival of media—photographs, it seems, collect "everything" before the camera's lens without discrimination—Mikhailov

follows Duchamp in creating an archive of vanishing clues and disappearing evidence. In the context of the former Soviet Union, this semiological practice had particular relevance, hinting as it does at the longstanding practice of manipulating published photographs by eliminating people who had fallen from official grace.

[...]

Mikhailov, who refers to his photographs as *kartochki* ("index cards"),<sup>9</sup> treated the images in his album technically in such a way that they appear old, an impression that is intensified by the yellow paper onto which they are glued. Commenting on this technique, he has proposed that photos should be made so that "just-born photography appears old, as if it had been met before."<sup>10</sup> The trope is a familiar one; like Duchamp's readymades, Mikhailov's snapshots aim to return to what is already familiar yet strangely distorted (*entstellt*). As instances of *Entstellung*, Mikhailov's archive spells out, in cryptic form, the traumatic repression that characterizes the history of photography in the artist's homeland. Its paired images function not unlike the syllables Freud refers to in his work on the etiology of hysteria. Freud found the establishment of the temporal contiguity of such syllables—his patients' ideas or associations—more important than their intuitive interpretation. "It is a rule of psycho-analytic technique that an internal connection which is still undisclosed will announce its presence by means of a contiguity—a temporal proximity—of associations; just as in writing, if 'a' and 'b' are put side by side, it means that the syllable 'ab' is to be formed out of them."<sup>11</sup> What such associations can tell the analyst about the patient's trauma depends fully on his ability to form "syllables" from these successive associations. Crucially, such contiguity is not synonymous with a semantic affinity between them, but refers only to their proximity in time.

To look at the pairs of photographs in Mikhailov's archive as syllables in Freud's sense is to explore the connection between the two images on a page in terms of their contiguity in space rather than to find a connection in their meaning. Taking this approach, we have

9 — See also Margarita Tupitsyn, "Photography as a Remedy for Stammering," in Boris Mikhailov, *Unfinished Dissertation* (Zurich: Scalo, 1998), 48.

10 — Ibid.

11 — Sigmund Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," *SE*, vol. 7 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), 39.

8 — Roman Jakobson with C. G. Fant and M. Halle, "The Concept of the Distinctive Feature," in Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 244.

мысль отбрасываю

Но надежды — это надежды  
"а реальность — это реальность"  
— освещает даже самые отрицательные  
— это значит освещает их с точки зрения положительного чуда.

Надежды



А любить тужкое  
может освободить  
от страхов необходимость

to resist the temptation to link the two paired images as part of a linear narrative that explains the changes occurring from one image to the next in terms of cause and effect. Where a narrative would fill in any gaps that may exist between the different parts of a story in a more structural approach like the one put forth by Freud, such gaps or absences—such as the differences between one image and the next—are treated as functional elements in the analytical process.

Absence—the missing element I referred to above as a missing or vanishing clue—is one of the central motifs in *Unfinished Dissertation*, as in the pair [. . .] where on the lower left of the upper image there is a bright, unidentified object that is missing from the lower image. Departing from the upper image, the observer's gaze moves to that point in the lower image where in the upper image the object is present. The main distinction between the images—the object missing in the second photograph that is present in the first—is supplemented by a host of other differences. While the scene and the person seem to be the same in both images, the movements executed by the woman's body are clearly not the same, a fact that might hint that we are dealing with two shots from a film sequence. However, like all other assumptions about the paired photographs in *Unfinished Dissertation*, this remains speculative. As inquiries into the evidentiary powers of photography, Mikhailov's images can be compared with John Hilliard's experiments with the cropping of images from the early 1970s (for example, *Cause of Death?*). Depending on what is taken away from an existing image, our understanding of the scene—and the narratives we construct to explain it—differ considerably.

One of the problems we face in [another of Mikhailov's pairs] is the fact that we have no way of telling from the images themselves which photograph was the first in the sequence. Unlike the paired photographs [by John Heartfield] published by the AIZ during the 1930s, in which an explanatory written commentary—mostly under the images, or to their side—established which photograph was the original and which the manipulated copy, in Mikhailov's album such a distinction remains elusive, as the handwritten notes surrounding the snapshots never comment on the images themselves. The difficulty we confront in *Unfinished Dissertation* is therefore the difficulty of turning these images into a story, an operation that would require us to establish a

point of origin. What we are left with is disturbingly close to [Hans-Peter] Feldmann's later archives: a random accumulation of images whose relations (similarities, differences) are rhizomatic, random, and chance-driven rather than vertical, organized, and predetermined. Not Jakobson's binary pairs, then, but Freud's syllables, nothing but discrete elements that are contiguous in space. Whatever relations exist between the images are a function no longer of the archive—the formal arrangement of the images in rows one over the other—but of our visual experience with the images themselves.

In [another Mikhailov panel], a fleeting glance might easily create the impression that the two pictures show the same scene at different times. Only on closer inspection do we become aware of the fact that we are dealing with two different scenes. The landscapes are complementary: what is land in one is water in the other, and vice versa. In terms of archive theory, the implication is simple enough; like Feldmann and [Gerhard] Richter, Mikhailov disavows the view of the archive as an agency that predetermines the terms of our visual perception before it occurs, establishing a field of (empty) relations waiting to be filled. By systematically undermining our sense that the images collected in the album represent binary pairs—so many discrete elements in a coherent narrative—he opens up the possibility of an archive that constitutes itself only as part of the viewer's interaction with it. In other words, the archive as a set of relations, similarities, or differences between a set of images does not preexist our experience of the rhizome-like relations between them. In this respect, *Unfinished Dissertation* differs dramatically from the nineteenth-century photo archive whose morphological approach assumed that perception needed to arm itself with the archive and a variety of bureaucratic supplements in order to control its objects effectively. In this spirit, nineteenth-century archives assumed that difference could be classified, and that archives preexisted the visual practice they were designed to administrate. In the late-twentieth-century archive, from [Susan] Hiller and Richter to [Walid] Raad and Mikhailov, the relations between images cannot be reduced to formal arrangements or categories. In their disavowal of narrative and an original *arkhe*, these archives display a tendency toward entropy, a tendency they share with the medium of photography itself. As [Siegfried] Kracauer writes, “however picky the photographer

may be, his images cannot deny the tendency towards what is diffuse and unorganized . . . That is why they are inevitably surrounded as it were by a border of indistinct . . . meanings.”<sup>12</sup>

12 — Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” in Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 49.

The archives discussed above reproduce the border of which Kracauer writes, an element that lies outside of the archive’s claim to order and organization and that is, at the same time, its very center.

Excerpted from *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

## A Guide to Ganek Gallery: The Archive of Július Koller’s Fictive Institution

DANIEL GRÚŇ

In geographical terminology, the Ganek Gallery is the name of an actually existing place in the High Tatras in Slovakia. It is the designation given to a protruding platform which is described in mountaineering guides as part of the Malý Ganek rock massif. The Slovak name Ganok, or Ganek in the Goral dialect, in Polish, and on older maps, identifies a peak on a high ridge of the Tatras. In folk-building terminology, the noun *ganok* means a veranda, gallery, or porch by the main entrance, and it characterises the shape of the Ganek Gallery. Malý Ganek (roughly 2425 m. above sea level) is a peak representing the highest point on the northwestern side of Velký Ganek (2461,8 m.). The Ganek Gallery (2250 m. approx.) is a broad scree terrace facing towards a valley known as the Ťažká (originally Česká) dolina. Cutting through this unique rock formation is a wall 280 to 300 metres high. Climbing routes which go over this wall represent at least the fourth grade of difficulty.<sup>1</sup>

In Czechoslovakia in the early 1980s, when artists’ only opportunities to exhibit were in the official exhibitions celebrating the socialist regime’s festivals, the Ganek Gallery emerged as a platform for developing and exchanging imaginative speculations. Which works will we display on the mountain rock terrace? Which thoughts and signals will we broadcast to the cosmos from a gallery situated in an inaccessible place? Which viewers will look at non-substantial works in a gallery without walls and

without staff? The participants acquired an opportunity to manage the gallery’s exhibition programme as a common thinking space, functioning virtually as a landing surface, a plinth, and a stage backdrop. By its very existence the gallery provoked the imagination and offered a chance to develop ideas freely within the given possibilities. The circumstances of the Ganek Gallery’s inception, which are the subject of this essay, will lead us to an unfulfilled ambition and a project of almost two decades’ duration whose original aim remained unrealised. Nevertheless, the traces preserved in the fragmentary notes and registers, the collected articles and reproductions from magazines, combined in a single whole, create an image of unspectacular revolt. In the unusual story of the Ganek Gallery we find a dialogic model of a parallel institution. Physically inaccessible and fictionally operational, it marks an important contribution towards alternative exhibition formats, such as museums or galleries initiated by artists.<sup>2</sup>

The Ganek Gallery surfaced from oblivion in an interview Roman Ondák conducted with Július Koller, which the artists prepared for the *Ausgeträumt*. . . exhibition in the Vienna Secession in 2001.<sup>3</sup> Hitherto only a few initi-

2 — Jeff Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva, *Institutions by Artists* (Vancouver: Fillip Editions, 2012).

3 — Roman Ondák, “Conversation with Július Koller,” in Kathrin Rhomberg, ed., *Ausgeträumt*. . . (Secession Wien, November 29, 2001–February 3, 2002), 37–38. The conversation was republished in *Július Koller. Universálne Futurologické Operácie* (Köln: Kölnischer Kunstverein/Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), 207.

1 — Arno Puškáš, *Vysoké Tatry. Horolezecký sprievodca – monografia. Diel V* [The High Tatras. Mountaineering Guide – monograph. Part V] (Bratislava: Šport, 1972).

ates had known about this project. Only at the very end of his life did Koller make some of the works public and exhibit some fragments from the documentation.<sup>4</sup> Hence the only medium where the Ganek Gallery functioned and grew over time was the artist's personal archive. On account of this the connections between the fictive gallery and the artist's activities in the 1970s and '80s were not known. Július Koller founded the Ganek Gallery as part of his life-long project Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations (U.F.O.) and kept detailed records of it in the form of magazine cut-outs, notes, and photographs. The archive captures not only the genesis of the idea but also a concatenation of ordinary life situations associated with the project. We find, for example, the culture of mountain tourism, an album of photos from family trips to the Tatras, and the Tatra motifs abundantly featured on postcards, which Koller used as groundwork for paintings and graphics. Although we do find some references of an older date in the archive, the gallery's inception is linked with the participation of further members, who in 1981 formed a community of kindred spirits and collectively wrote the gallery's constitution.

We find sources of Koller's work in the culture of trash, in cheap popular brochures, in documentary reportage, and in comic strips and the schemas of postcard images. He draws from the world of everyday mass consumption. Artistic being, for Koller, is a play with realities which are not just outside of art but are actually on the border of all that can be perceived by sight and manipulated by media. It is not only the actual U.F.O. motifs that are important here but, even more so, the functional mechanism of fiction in Koller's U.F.O.-designating acts, which Georg Schöllhammer has characterised as an aesthetic instrument for overcoming the passivity of social relationships after 1968.<sup>5</sup> Between the U.F.O.-designating acts and their possible mutation in language games, a wide field of references and relationships opens up. Popular science magazines, such as *Vysoké Tatry* and *Krasy Slovenska*, were popularising mountain tourism, and for Koller they became

a communication medium for fictive operations. In conditions where information flows are under ideological control, Koller's gallery for contact with extraterrestrial civilizations identifies the interchangeability of fiction and fact and sets these elements in play in an original manner. The green colour of a child's hand-stamp printing set may have a significance pointing to ecology and the military occupation of Czechoslovakia. Koller adapted the occupation as a method of appropriation; the whole world, through the medium of cultural situations, becomes an object of designation and appropriation. Thus Koller's Ganek Gallery finds itself between metaphysics and politics, between individualised escapism and group engagement in a privatised aesthetic space. If Koller enters into the everyday schemas of control and order, if he concerns himself with the analysis of everydayness, then the question arises as to why he needed to found a fictive gallery for his activities. In the socialist countries of Eastern Europe the avant-garde art of this period was characteristically received only by a micropublic, confined to the community of artists and their friends.<sup>6</sup> Having regard to the absence of social discourse and the impossibility of presenting their unconventional work under the auspices of official institutions, the artists developed alternative methods of contact and exchange in likeminded communities. We might think of Alex Mlynárčik's foundation of an imaginary state, the kingdom of Argillia, in 1974, as a close parallel in Slovak art.<sup>7</sup> Mlynárčik was a key figure in the Slovak avant-garde at that time, and after the closing of the borders he began to create an imaginary society, thereby overcoming the progressive isolation of the country, which was increasingly cut off from what was happening internationally. In contrast to Argillia, the Ganek Gallery did not seek to communicate the ideal of a social order not bounded by the existing borders of nation-states. The Ganek Gallery is not a utopian vision of an institution, as is the case with Argillia, where Mlynárčik used all accessible attributes of the institution to inaugurate the idea of a timeless ideal state; it is rather an institution constituted for utopian visions.

4 — Július Koller, *Space Is the Place* (Paris: gb agency, June 2–July 21, 2007). See also: "Education: Július Koller," in Georg Schöllhammer, Roger M. Buergel, and Ruth Noack, eds., *Documenta 12 Magazine*, No. 3 (2007), 36–39.

5 — Georg Schöllhammer, "Engagement Instead of Arrangement ... Július Koller's Erratic World: On the Re-Conception of Aesthetic Space since the 1960s," in Július Koller, *Universálne Futurologické Operácie* (Köln: Kölnischer Kunstverein/Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), 128.

6 — Boris Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," in *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 85.

7 — Pierre Restany and Alex Mlynárčik, *Inde/Ailleurs* (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 1995), 147–151.



The Ganek Gallery is a factographic fiction, organised as a social game in apartment spaces and without a secondary public, in which participants play at being a bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>8</sup> Koller privatised a space for the gallery in an inaccessible mountain terrain as a reaction to the inadequacy of other exhibiting opportunities. He imitated and also ridiculed the principles of institutional operation.<sup>9</sup> The gallery's collectively prepared fictional programme, accompanied by a call to submit suggestions for the exhibition plan, did not go beyond the narrow circle of initiates. Despite its original aims, the Ganek Gallery never made a public appearance. Accordingly, the overall picture of the project of a fictive gallery becomes clear only with the passage of time, through a reconstruction of Koller's self-archiving strategy. The practices of recording and organising one's own artistic activities, also known as self-archiving, is connected with the effort to control their reception. In this process the artist himself becomes the holder of the archive, thus compensating for the insufficient or nonexistent collective interest on the part of public institutions. Since it represents a kind of counter-model of the institution, self-archiving manifests itself as a political strategy.<sup>10</sup> The culture of printed periodicals, intensified through Koller's collecting activity, gives the artist space to project his aesthetic territory. We can speak also of self-historicisation, as well as collection and documentary preservation of the works and activities of artists and artistic communities who were marginalised by local cultural politics, or indeed reduced to invisibility in the international artistic context.<sup>11</sup> The working methods described by these terms are important for understanding Koller's position on the frontier of art, popular culture, and everyday life. The significances of individual works associated with the fictive gallery are revealed by a

retrospective linking of circumstances into a single whole in the immensely rich complex of his work.

Despite concentrated efforts by Slovak art historians mapping the art scene of the 1960s and '70s, Koller's project of a fictive gallery has not received its due response and has thus remained without adequate historical interpretation.<sup>12</sup> The reasons must be sought principally in the artist himself, rather than in historians' prejudice or lack of comprehension. Another and possibly equally important obstacle to thinking on this project is the fragmentary form of documentation, the deliberate deviation from the conventions of exhibiting, and the overall character of a relatively isolated and, in relation to art, mainly parallel event. Koller's work in the domain of culture could lead to a retrospective diagnosis of emotional escape from the social conditions determining the form and conventional definitions of art. If this project is an escape, why does it take such meticulous care with the language of the bureaucratic apparatus? Social-diagnostics aside, a more important aspect is the inspirational potential which this radical model of the gallery left behind for future generations.

[...]

### Language as Bureaucratic Apparatus: The Statute of the Fictive Gallery

Ganek Gallery magnetised Koller's attention to the point where he extended his project to apartment meetings, during which he introduced his manifesto and the gallery project to invited participants. Collectively they drafted the programme statute and discussed individual exhibition suggestions. There is a brief record from 1980 on a text card, assigning the Gallery Exhibition (Ganek–High Tatras) amongst the Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations. An organisational and advisory committee came into being on September 18, 1981, and on March

8 — I use the term "factography" in the sense given it by Benjamin Buchloh when analysing the procedures of the Soviet avant-garde. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Od factory k faktografii," in Karel Císař, ed., *Co je to fotografie?* (Praha: Hermann & Synové), 186–187.

9 — Zora Rusinová, "Problém koexistencie kultúr" [The Problem of the Coexistence of Cultures], in Aurel Hrabušický, ed., *Slovenské vizuálne umenie 1970–1985* [Slovak Visual Art 1970–1985] (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2002), 30.

10 — Beatrice von Bismarck, "Arena Archiv. Artistic Self-archiving: Processes and Spaces," in *Interactive. Archivische Praktiken und Handlungsräume im zeitgenössischen Kunstfeld* [Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art Field] (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2002), 456–460.

11 — Zdenka Badovinac, *Prekinjena Zgodovine* [Interrupted Histories] (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2006), n.p.

12 — Here I would like to mention two important works by Slovak historians of art who have engaged in sustained reflections on Koller's work since the end of the 1980s. Aurel Hrabušický locates Koller among the key protagonists of the dematerialisation of the artwork, particularly in terms of analysis of the concept of art and of the painting as medium. Aurel Hrabušický, "Umenie Fantastického Odhmotnenia" [The Art of Fantastic Dematerialization], in *Slovenské vizuálne umenie 1970–1985* [Slovak Visual Art 1970–1985] (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2002), 148. Zuzana Bartošová gives a detailed mapping of the activity of the unofficial scene in contemporary cultural-political and social frameworks. Zuzana Bartošová, *Napriek totalite. Neoficiálna slovenská výtvarná scéna sedemdesiatych a osemdesiatych rokov 20 storočia* [Despite Totality: The Unofficial Slovak Art Scene in the 1970s and '80s] (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2011), 195.

24 of the following year the committee approved a programme and a set of statutory principles. Subsequently a typewritten text was produced of the constitution of the gallery, which was named U.F.O. Gallery—Ganek Gallery, High Tatras (U.F.O.G.), and signed by Július Koller (founder), Igor Gazdik (commissioner), and committee members Milan Adamčiak, Pavol Breier, Peter Meluzin, and Rudolf Sikora. In 1983 these were joined by Dezider Tóth and Juraj Meliš. From handwritten notes it is evident that Koller planned to extend the gallery's membership and was considering a public presentation, which did not, however, become a reality. Meetings of the organising committee in 1982 and 1983 in the apartments of Koller, Adamčiak and Gazdik were recorded photographically by Květoslava Fulierová and Pavol Breier. These group photos from apartment meetings show a handful of high-spirited men comically squeezing together in a small tower-block living room so as to fit within the camera's viewfinder.

The project's archival documentation consists of magazine reproductions of photographic views of the Malý Ganek peak, plus a number of working versions of a two-page typewritten document defining the project, the statutory principles, and the organising committee of the U.F.O. Gallery. Furthermore, the dossier contains Koller's handwritten notes, cards, and photographs of those participating in the apartment meetings. Examining a number of extant working versions of the U.F.O. Gallery project, one sees that the participants gave exceptional attention to the articulation and rhetoric of this document. They were in agreement that the U.F.O. Gallery was not a club or a society; as a fictive institution it was not a legal subject, did not have a political or ideological programme, was constituted on the principle of tolerance of creative procedures, and distanced itself from all real and potential expressions of violence. The first paragraph of the statute defines the U.F.O. Gallery as a project for a fictive gallery for cosmo-humanistic culture, and Koller's Universal-Cultural Futurological Operations (U.F.O.) are identified as the context of the gallery's inception. This genealogy is extremely important for Koller's work, and in manuscript notes the gallery project is integrated into a series of activities beginning with the anti-happening manifesto of 1965. The U.F.O. Gallery Statute (introduction) rules out exhibition activities on the physical Ganek Gallery, but justifies the choice of the mountain

terrain for its symbolic location between earth and the cosmos. Its role was to mediate communication in a variety of alternative forms and expressions, i.e., images, concepts, signals, etc., with unknown civilizations of all types on our planet and also in extraterrestrial spheres of the universe. The choice of the Ganek Gallery is justified by the fact that the Malý Ganek massif with its almost 300-metre-high, minimally articulated, and forbidding northwest wall, is an attraction for climbers. The obliquely inclined platform known as Ganek Gallery began to function as a visual and physical symbol of cosmo-humanistic culture and a medium of communication with unknown civilisations. Here again we have designation as a medium of double reference, so characteristic of Koller's action and conceptual art. The statutory principles of the gallery are very similar to those upon which art institutions conventionally operated—they concisely establish the conditions of acceptance and return of contributions, membership, and the work of the organising committee. The project thus takes on the form of a social game, extending the options for spending one's free time. On the basis of the rules enacted, the participants make suggestions and discuss ideas, which thus become potentially real.

The rules in the gallery statute have a discursive tenor, which is based on the assumption that the most reliable source of knowledge of a socialist institution is precisely what that institution says about itself. In real socialism, according to the Czech critic Petr Fidelius, instead of conceptual differentiation an opposite process sets in: concepts become reduced in content and hollowed out, they mix and they merge, and gradually they become interchangeable ciphers for one and the same thing.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to this emptying of concepts, the inauguration of the fictive gallery is securely defined from the linguistic aspect. It is only its goals that are incomprehensible for the art milieu that functions conventionally.

[. . .]

### From Anti-Gallery to Fictive Institution

Let's imagine a casual pedestrian walking along Klobučnícka Street in Bratislava sometime near the end of 1968. It's late November, and the streets still have visible traces of the August disturbances provoked by the occupying army's invasion. The display window of the communal

13 — Petr Fidelius, *Řeč komunistické moci* [The Language of Communist Power] (Praha: Tráda, 1998), 196.

Hosiery Express Repairs has an exhibition of anti-pictures, painted with marching lines of question marks in latex colour on textile. Július Koller, together with his friend Peter Bartoš, placed them there regularly from 1968 to 1971. What attracted the young artists was the polemical presentation of their own works in an informal setting and the dissolution of the boundary between art, advertising, and merchandise.<sup>14</sup>

The Display Window or The Permanent Anti-Gallery, as the artists named their exhibition room on the street, involved an unspectacular but, in terms of the later work, crucial shift towards non-exhibition forms of the presentation of ideas. 1970 was in many ways a breakthrough year for Koller. It was then that for the first time (and for long afterwards it was also the last time) he published an inventory of his art-actions carried out from 1965 to 1969.<sup>15</sup> The published manifestos and brief descriptions of his actions, articulated modestly and without pathos, put emphasis on communication, participation, and engagement in social processes: "Formation of one's own life . . . as an individual cultural expression . . . transferring sporting games to the sphere of culture . . . the author's participation in the formation of a new cosmo-humanistic culture."<sup>16</sup> Cosmo-humanistic culture represented a wide field of activities, with the central position no longer being occupied by Man/Artist/Art but rather by the author's transmission of signals to the universal spaces. Therefore the medium, too, must correspond to the character of these signals. Koller printed and disseminated fictive admission tickets, telegrams, announcements, and text cards. One of the text cards has the stamped inscription "Non-exhibition (1969)"; without giving a reason, it announces the non-holding of an exhibition. Another bears the title "Season Ticket for Shockialism (1969)" and relates to the political situation immediately after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, offering a season's admission to a public performance of a shocking society.

Koller deliberately erases the boundaries between sporting and artistic events. In March

1970, he used the opportunity of a solo exhibition at the Galéria Mladých to play table tennis with visitors at regular intervals during the exhibition's duration. He turned the gallery into a sports-club setting with a ping-pong table, sporting flags decorated with the initials J. K., and an announcement about the conditions for playing.<sup>17</sup> In the same year, when an unofficial exhibition entitled *1st Open Studio* was held in the house of the painter Rudolf Sikora on Tehelná Street in Bratislava, Koller sent a telegram containing the statement "UME? NIE!" and distancing himself from the "modernistic exhibitions" of his colleagues ("UMENIE" = "Art"; "NIE" = "No").

The reason why Koller's work tended towards anti-art is connected with the cultural atmosphere in the country in the period surrounding the crisis year of 1968. Koller's works are a question and simultaneously also an answer to the current social enthusiasm for the political utopia of so-called socialism with a human face. His work resonated in the atmosphere of protest songs heard on the radio.

During the Prague Spring, when censorship was temporarily abolished, the print media culture flourished, and social euphoria was fully released in a short-lived freedom of the word, Koller introduced a reflective scepticism and irony represented by a tautological question mark. Although Koller discovered and cultivated his aesthetics of negation in different social conditions, there is a certain parallel here to the activities of the Gorgona Group in Zagreb in the period from 1959 to 1966.<sup>18</sup> Gorgona considered itself a promoter of new methods of artistic communication and the initiator of radical forms of art in former Yugoslavia. The group organised experimental exhibitions and published an anti-magazine, and what resulted from their communal, spontaneous intellectual games were unrealised concepts or immaterial works. More detailed discussion of the similarities and differences in the anti-art which appeared from the beginning of the 1960s in different geographical areas of Eastern Europe may throw further light on their social

14 — Radislav Matušik, "... Predým 1971. Prekročenie hraníc" [... Previously 1971. Crossing the Boundaries] (Žilina: Považská galéria, 1994), 67. "The display window is unquestionably a very clearly and thoroughly conceived polemical action—an anti-exhibition."

15 — *JK Ping-pong klub* (Bratislava: Galéria Mladých, 1970), cyclostyled folder, text author Igor Gazdík.

16 — Július Koller, "Z autorských programov a akcií," [From the Author's Programmes and Actions], in *Výtvarný život* 15, no. 8 (1970), 41.

17 — Klaus Groh, *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* (Köln: Dumont Verlag, 1972).

18 — Nena Dimitrijević, "Gorgona: Art as a Way of Existence," in Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszył, eds., *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 124. The members of the Gorgona Group were visual artists, art critics, and architects: Josip Vaništa, Julije Knifer, Radoslav Putar, Ivan Kožarić, Marijan Jevšovar, Mangelos (Dimitrije Bašičević), and Đuro Seder.

consequences. In her essay on experiment in Yugoslav art of the 1960s and '70s, Ana Janevski writes that the foundation of the Gorgona anti-group, the publication of an anti-magazine, the anti-paintings of Julije Knifer, the non-arts of Mangelos (Dimitrije Bašičević), and the production of anti-films in the film clubs, had its ultimate result in the so-called New Artistic Practice, which was developed above all in the student centres of former Yugoslavia. The self-organisational side of the Gorgona Group's activity led to the construction of a parallel life, going beyond anti-institutional gestures, and therefore opened a space for the "interiorisation of art," for departure from the public sphere, for escapist visions and dematerialised actions.<sup>19</sup> Using similar instruments of negation to those of the Gorgona Group, from 1968 to 1971 Július Koller conducted his activities in a rapid progression from negation of exhibition to the holding of fictive exhibitions, employing the medium of sport as a permanent future-orientated field of operation.

The Ganek Gallery, as a project for a fictive institution initiated by an artist, has many parallels in the work of artists in the then "western" world. Fictional museums appear at the time when artists begin to involve themselves in museum discourse. They take up the inherited contradictory relationship between avant-garde and museum, and may criticise the ideological context in which art is created and presented.<sup>20</sup> The artists' fictive institutions cast doubt on the objectivity of the histories written with the museum's authority, undermining their seeming neutrality in the received set of exhibition practices. The idea of the fictive exhibition was sparked off by the political and social tension at the end of the 1960s, when anti-institutional protests, in the spirit of the cultural revolution culminating in the student protests of May 1968, reached their peak. One may take as an example Marcel Broodthaers's celebrated *Musée d'art moderne, Département des aigles*, or Robert Filliou's *Galerie légitime*. Where else would an artist find a better place for a gallery than in his own hat? Robert Filliou created a stamp for the gallery, inscribed: "*Galerie légitime couvre chef-d'œuvre*," hence his gallery might equally be a cover for his head

or a cover for his work.<sup>21</sup> While the normative criticism of institutions in the 1960s and '70s, using various forms of intervention and activist demonstrations, drew attention to the fact that the museum is a public institution,<sup>22</sup> the fictive institutions establish parallel worlds, and they introduce and develop practices which for various reasons are not present in the museum. In contrast to the former West, where critical dialogue with the bureaucratic and ideological apparatus of the museum brought artists into direct confrontation with the art institution, among artists in Slovakia there was rather a growing desire for the museum,<sup>23</sup> which led to the foundation of parallel initiatives and alternative forms of presentation for unofficial art. Expressions of this desire for the museum were accompanied by the trauma symptom of split personality (the artists became simultaneously the regime's decorators and its opponents) and symbolic exclusion from the institutional operation of real socialism.

Because Július Koller elaborated his basic ideas in fragments, variations, and cyclical formats, his medium can be measured in the format of the popular magazine, card index, or family album. A particular favourite of his was the mimicry of administrative work, as expressed by traumatic repetition. The routine day-to-day work of the artist proceeded in a number of mutually linked activities; his work was indissolubly connected with self-documentation, indeed self-institutionalisation. Koller developed an entire iconography of the stamps of the fictive futurological organisation, but he addressed it not to the museum of modern art but to the ideological mechanisms of the anonymous bureaucratic machinery mirrored by his own (in volume and number) growing archive. In this respect Koller's bureaucratic agenda may be compared with Moscow conceptualism, as interpreted by Boris Groys: "They could extend their analytical and critical method to the entire Soviet system; they could claim to reflect all of Soviet culture. The Moscow Conceptualists understood their praxis to be enlightening

21 — A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale, eds., *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 89–92.

22 — Alex Alberro, "Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 5.

23 — Petra Hanáková, "Museum as Site Specificity: From Institutional Criticism to Decoration," in Jana Geržová and Katarína Rusnáková, eds., *90s+ Reflections of the Visual Art at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Century* (Bratislava: Slovak Section of AICA, 2003), 48.

19 — Ana Janevski, *As Soon as I Open My Eyes I See a Film: Experiment in the Art of Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 18–19.

20 — Kynaston McShine, ed., *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 13.

Soviet culture about its own ideological mechanisms.”<sup>24</sup> Koller’s method is to offer instruction about ideological mechanisms, while on the other hand drawing upon collective utopias, using the entire range of imagery of pseudo-scientific theories and science fiction. In *The Restoration of Order*, devoted to the typology of real socialism in Czechoslovakia after 1968, the philosopher Milan Šimečka writes that the fundamental condition of order in real socialism was the direction of information.

Information is the neuralgic point of real socialism. The entire organism of socialist society reacts with alarm to every undirected item of information, immediately surrounds it with conjectures, and receives it as a signal of breakdown in the total direction. This sensitivity has been cultivated by years of habituation to reading newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching television. Even an unusual photograph, an amendment of a report, the absence of a common phrase in its usual place, often provokes a landslide of speculation.<sup>25</sup>

Every deviation from the normal potentially created a space where Július Koller could achieve an incursion of his “poetic” speech. His work of incessantly commenting on, de-masking, and demystifying the linguistic conventions of the institutionalised discourse of art is de facto a work for the release of pleasure (*jouissance*). Slavoj Žižek writes that in real socialism the utopian dimension, excluded by its “scientification,” returns in the Real, and thus that real socialism is the price paid for misrecognition of the fantasy dimension of scientific socialism.<sup>26</sup> Czechoslovakia in particular was the country where the collective utopia of socialism with a human face was suppressed by force and excised from public discourse. Defined in Žižek’s words, fantasy is the means by which we attempt, via an imaginary construct, to come to terms with the stalemate situation in which we are situated as speaking beings. Koller’s situational contact with unidentifiable objects and phenomena, achieved without detachment from ordinary routine as “the culture of life,” returns the expelled fantasmatic dimension to

the milieu of everyday existence. Through the humble genres of popular journalism and science fiction, Koller attempts communication with his social milieu. In the atmosphere of a general consolidation of the rules of power, he restores to society the existential dimension of uncertainty. In his *Questionnaire* (1972) he registers these questions:

YOUR OPINION ON UFO?  
DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE EXISTENCE  
OF UFO?  
HAVE YOU OBSERVED UFO?  
FROM WHICH CIVILISATION IS UFO?  
IS CONTACT POSSIBLE WITH UFO?

### The Gallery as Factographic Fiction

In one of the key works on the history and poetics of science fiction, Darko Suvin defined this genre as a literature of cognitive estrangement.<sup>27</sup> According to Suvin, science fiction is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and mutual operation of estrangement and cognition, and whose principal formal instrument is imaginative arrangement, as an alternative to the empirical environment of the author. Suvin observed that science fiction in the 20th century relocated itself to the sphere of anthropological and cosmological reflection, thereby becoming a diagnosis, a warning, and a challenge to map out possible alternatives. Renate Lachmann has pointed to the fact that fantasy is a construction of complex alternatives for knowledge. It evokes alternatives which are forgotten or taboo, repressed, or no longer forming part of general knowledge; on the other hand it confronts culture (archaeologically) with what has been forgotten or (futurolologically) with what has not yet been realised.<sup>28</sup> If we assume that Koller perceived science fiction as an ironic instrument for intervention in everyday settings, then we need to understand his work as an application of the mechanisms of factographic fiction. Imagery of futurollogical prognoses and speculative theories figures as instruments for an unspectacular subversion of social systems. The fact that the artist is pointing to unidentifiable phenomena does not mean that he is shifting

24 — Boris Groys, Max Hollein, and Manuel Fontán del Junco, eds., *Die Totale Aufklärung Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960–1990* [Total Enlightenment Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960–1990] (Frankfurt am Main: Schirin Kunsthalle Frankfurt; Ostfildern: JATKE Cantz Verlag, 2008), 31.

25 — Milan Šimečka, *Obnovenie poriadku* [The Restoration of Order] [1972] (Bratislava: Archa, 1990), 52.

26 — Slavoj Žižek, “The Fetish of the Party,” in Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, eds., *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings* (London: Continuum, 2006), 88–89.

27 — Interpreting Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, Suvin points to the difference in meaning between estrangement and alienation. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 4.

28 — Renate Lachmann, *Memoria fantastika* (Praha: Hermann & Synové, 2002), 139.

them away from the current of the everyday: on the contrary, he is returning them to the actual environment of life. For Koller, the social environment becomes an object of permanent questioning. The initial letters of the acronym U.F.O. (Unidentified Flying Objects) served him as a verbal designation of his lifelong sequence of actions. The unidentifiable phenomenon may be a product of conspiracy theories, illustrated by effects of optical anomalies and introduced by the method of media montage, behind which lies hidden the Orwellian manipulation of the individual by the machinery of power. Far from being based on an enthusiasm for technology or an expectation of possible “encounters of the third kind,” Koller’s fictional interventions are governed by a profound scepticism towards media representations, in relation to which the artist imposes fundamental principles of play. The aim of such creativity is an effort to describe the world newly and to open up new possibilities of intervention in it.

Even to the present day, thinking about alternatives for artistic communication is influenced by the projection of the gallery as a non-exhibition space. A curatorial project entitled *Utopia Station* for the 50th Biennale in Venice in 2003 proposed a common space for the collective examination of utopias in the form of individual propositions.<sup>29</sup> Július Koller participated in this exhibition, submitting one of 158 posters. In Roman Ondák’s work also we find unobtrusive changes in the arrangement of the gallery space, introducing, for example, fictitious elements in the viewer’s perceptive field. The fictive elements trigger effects which are

reminiscent of reality, to the point where fiction and reality are indissociable one from the other. The attempt to redefine a place for the presentation of works and to change the received rituals of museum practice so that moments of everyday activities appear within them, links the work of both these artists.<sup>30</sup> The Ganek Gallery became just such a means and a platform where fact and fiction merged: a really existing place and a precisely designated, identified but non-existent exhibiting institution. Ganek Gallery is a radical junction of the possible and the impossible. It’s distant, absent, and materialised through the magazine reproductions as a gesture of appropriation; active space is a nodal point where a collectively lived aesthetic experience is encountered. Layered within this experience are images of mountain scenery, tragic stories of people who exhausted their powers in struggle with the natural elements, and the projection of imaginary patterns disrupting the causally established arrangement of the known world. The documentation of the Ganek Gallery lacks a firm schema of archival components; it has to be assembled from what has survived in the personal archives of Igor Gazdik, Milan Adamčiak, Peter Meluzin, Pavol Breier, Július Koller, and Květoslava Fulierová. Just as Koller developed the acronym U.F.O. into endless designations and language games, the fictive gallery, too, is a construct of the schematic utterances of art institutions. The aim is an imaginary subversion of the impersonal lexicon, producing a real space for utopian visions orientated towards the future.

Excerpted from *Július Koller: Galéria Ganku*. Edited by Daniel Grűn. Vienna: Schlebrűgge, 2014.

29 — Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, “What Is Station?,” in Anke Finger and Danielle Follett, eds., *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2011), 134.

30 — Elena Filipović, “The Ordinary as an Aesthetic Operation,” in *Roman Ondák Notebook* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Bank AG; Osfildern: Hatje Cantz), 118.

## Politics of Cultural Heritage

subREAL

### On some mentality handicaps

The history of the ’90s starts and ends under the sign of the ARCHIVE. The archives compiled by the secret services of the Communist “bloc” are one side of this reality. The corporate

databases meant for monitoring potential customers are the other.

Let’s have a look here at the symmetrical cases of the East German Stasi and the Romanian Securitate archives, and at their respective faiths.



subREAL. A.H.A., Lesson 1: How to Change Your Wall Paper Daily. 1995.  
Installation, 32' 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" × 26' 2<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" × 14' 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (10 × 8 × 4.5 m), Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin.  
Courtesy subREAL (Călin Dan and Iosif Király)

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The German case is one of bureaucratic efficiency, where ethical targets are met by the simple reversal of the operating system in place until the fall of the wall: data gathering is replaced by data dissemination; limited access is replaced by public access; institutional oppression by individual interpretation; top-to-bottom regulation by horizontal self-regulation.

The Romanian case is a messy one, with competing attitudes and solutions. Starting in December 1989 with the unfortunate sacking of the Communist Party's Central Committee; then with the deliberate fires set at various locations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and of the Securitate (the most troubling case is the complete burning of the Central University Library which, due to its location, was hiding also "conspirative" facilities of the Securitate).

Continuing with the fierce debates (in both Parliament and media) about: closing the archives for  $x$  years; opening the archives only to authorized (?) persons; opening the archives for full access; destroying "unnecessary" materials (the latest became policy at least in one notorious case, when several truckloads of files were dumped in the junk area of Berevoiești, not far from Bucharest).

Ending with the use of secret service files as weapons in political fights and as sensational material in trash publications.

All the previous facts and attitudes are rooted in (besides corruption and selfishness) a deep ignorance about the nature of archives, and about the role they play at this point in history. At the end of modernity, archives are, next to and beyond their functional aspect, an embodiment of cultural heritage. They have to be protected and made available for public visit and scrutiny—in the same way that old churches and monuments, museums, theaters, and libraries are.

But unlike those institutions, archives do not carry ethical characteristics; they are in that sense amoral. Moral quality is the input of those who access them: people make sense of archives—not the other way round.

The emotional way in which the Romanian political class deals with the Securitate archives proves the difficulties this society as a whole has in dealing with issues which are prone to be interpreted in different, even opposite, ways—an impossibility to accept dialogue, basically.

And also a refusal of history as another dimension of the present: things of the past have to be buried with the past; as for the future—it is something that can be determined

right now, by decrees. A paternalistic culture profiles itself from that bizarre contradiction between the superficial adoration of a past seen just as a series of amorphous clichés, and the concealed [contempt] for a future to which no free space of opinion is left. Because that is the very source of archive-phobia manifest in the Romanian society: fear. Fear of interpretation and judgment, fear of exploration and analyses that might uncover hidden truths about the other but also about the self.

The inside-out operation of the Stasi proved that a) the East Germans were heavily surveilled; b) large parts of the population compromised with the regime up (or down) to collaboration; c) the Stasi was a well-run and successful operation, under the criteria of functionality asserted to oppressive systems.

The Securitate carnival managed to plunge Romanian society into yet another painful set of dilemmas. Was the Securitate: a) an efficient system of oppression as proven by the terror experienced in the last 50 years by major parts of the population; or b) an amateur operation, as proven by the quality of so many writings by and interviews with top officials of the apparatus, which are practically polluting the media of the '90s?

If a), then Romanians come out of communism as a people that suffered major wounds and need special consideration from the international community.

If b), Romanians can look at themselves as a population of accomplices. Unfortunately there are no answers in sight to this dilemma, since there is no archive at hand where to look for them.

The wanderings of the *Arta* magazine photo archives are a case that illustrates some of the statements made above. Although these were not secret archives, they were not accessible to the public. And, considering the state of legal mess in which we inherited them, they were also self-ignored archives, in danger of being destroyed due to institutional negligence. Although there is no eagerness to open access to these archives, or to submit them to a necessary operation of classification/research, a certain aura of concern floats randomly around them. The *Arta* archives are an amoral corpus like any other archive, but in this case amorality is expressed in a somehow graphic manner.

The right to access and to use this material by subREAL comes periodically under scrutiny not because of some ethical concerns, but because of personal discomfort. Copyright and property

issues are just a smokescreen meant to hide the good old reflexes of censorship: subREAL did work with archives, instead of stashing them in a dark corner or trashing them—as the standard procedures go. This is enough reason for discontent. But even more—subREAL is using the archives in a discourse which does not fit the official views on the national artistic values.

The freedom of expression cannot be questioned in the '90s; it would be politically incorrect. Therefore the right to discourse is questioned by the bias of questioning the means of the discourse. As soon as the suspicion of appropriation comes in (subREAL “has stolen” it), the *Arta* archives are about cultural heritage, about historical value, and they need protection against abusive appropriation. As soon as subREAL makes an artistic statement starting from the archives, the archives themselves becomes a negative entity, putting “us” (Romania?/ Romanian art?/ the people?/ the Government?) in a wrong, untruthful light. Under the buzz of principles (one cannot use what one doesn't own) lies the corpse of the old offended question, how dare they say this?

What fascinates us in these archives, what made us visit them for years (while they were still stored in the magazine's office), is a combination of chaos and comprehensiveness. Those piles of photographs, no matter how you look at them, are the exciting, unpredictable, and still the most accurately true image one can get about the Romanian visual arts in the given period.

With its personalities and failures, with its sordid secrets and its moments of triumph, with its daily efforts and compromises, with its lust for survival and its passion for decorum, with its intrigues and its frantic partying—with all. Part of the excitement we experienced entered, we hope, in the A.H.A. project.

Another fascinating aspect of the *Arta* archives is its unflattering character. In a domain (the art system) where hypocrisy is (still and everywhere) the rule, and in a society (the Romanian one) where the pompous discourses defined all aspects of life for so long, it was extremely refreshing to see how the shallow peaks crumble, how power figures are massified, how fake masterpieces turn ridiculous, how oppressive paranoiacs become a pile of paper. And all that by just looking at pictures, by browsing, by putting B/W image next to B/W image, until the reality accepted its dominant color—gray.

And then the boredom, of course. Archives embody the mystique of boredom, and the *Arta*

archives are no exception to that. Boredom is a front cover preserving archives from intruders looking for easy excitement: you have to fight your way in a flattening environment, which puts the context above the individual value. That is also what makes art archives an endangered species: oddly enough, 6 decades after W. Benjamin's luminary essay, people keep a strong distrust of technical reproductions, and a fanaticism for the uniqueness of the art piece.

In this context, Romanian culture is particularly ill-prepared to “swallow” the various appropriations that fed modern art history—other than qualifying them as eccentric. In a country that still has to fight with the traumas of industrialization and urbanization, the cult of the unique is overwhelming.

In a country where mass media was cut from any natural development for 50 years, the way printed media and photography are building myths at the level of culture is still a novelty. In that context, where we can even say that photography belongs to “new media,” the appropriation art (archive art, citation art, plagiarism, etc.—phenomena already settled in a system of references) is ignored and even potentially unacceptable.

But trying to implement such realities in our culture by an artificial operation would be inefficient and arrogant, and our mentioning of them here is contextual. We started our trip with A.H.A. as a query about our own identity, about the way in which—through our very profession as artists and art journalists, but also through more general shifting phenomena—we became what we were (still are)—the Serfs of Art.

Some will find our tone pessimistic, others ironic or disrespectful. A third party will question the artistry of our discourse. Others will bring in copyright issues, image property issues a.s.o. We can agree with all of them, thanks to our comprehensive position: with the legs widely spread between the totalitarian '80s and the libertarian '90s, between the illusory localisms of Romania and the fake globalisms of Europe, we are doomed (if not by merit, at least by birth) to be part of all systems and to please them all.

From our perspective, that is what the A.H.A. says: living realities (individuals, networks) are swallowed into amorphous data. Data processing blurs the border between individual identity and political identity. Apoliticism is illusion, as dissidence without compromises is illusion (or madness). Privacy does not exist: whenever

a line is drawn around a person, a statement, an art object, something alien falls within that border and something valuable falls out of it.

We are certain that our contribution to the archive phenomenon, namely to the analysis of A.H.A., is historically determined. At this moment we consider that the Romanians live in denial of their political participation in the previous regime just because they can't see themselves surviving out of that denial.

We believe that people have a problem with institutional specificity: they love to be part of institutions, but do not know how to use them.

We noticed that institutions do not have the

practice of individual reference. That is why archives do not become databases and why public access is still a random reality.

Of course all those negative aspects will disappear very soon, and our A.H.A. point of view will become obsolete. But this is another positive aspect of archives: they always get renewed by fresh approaches. We will be happy to lie back and enjoy the many ways in which archive issues will be developed further, by other actors. As for the time being, it was nice working with you all!

Originally published in *Art History Archive*. Bucharest: The Romanian Ministry of Culture, 1999.

## Kisieland

KAROL RADZISZEWSKI

In 2008, I began work on a special issue of my self-published periodical, *DIK Fagazine*. It was entirely devoted to the life of homosexuals in Central and Eastern Europe before 1989. While I was digging into the subject and searching for resources, I met many different people whom I then interviewed. This is how I came across Ryszard Kisiel, among others. At first I only knew that in the 1980s he had been publishing *Filo*, the first half-legally distributed among friends gay zine in this part of Europe. During subsequent meetings that took place at Kisiel's home in Gdańsk, I had a chance to get acquainted with his extensive archive, which allowed me to discover new facts about the gay community of the period and learn about various aspects of his activities.

One day Ryszard pulled out a plastic bag full of carefully annotated boxes containing almost 300 colour slides. As it turned out, these were documented photographic sessions arranged by Kisiel and his friends in one of their private apartments. The slides were made at the end of 1985 and the beginning of 1986 as a direct reaction to the "Hyacinth" action (a large-scale operation of Citizens' Militia whose objective was to collect information about Polish gays and their environment, and which resulted in the registering of around 11,000 personal files). As Kisiel admits: "Once they started to uncover us, there was no point in staying hidden anymore. We had nothing to lose, so we decided

to do our own thing and not be bothered by anything."

The slides I discovered do not seem shocking; however, they break with stereotypical ways of thinking about that time in the People's Republic of Poland and are a specific visual testimony of the period. They challenge the image of the homosexual as a hounded victim, revealing instead a great potential for positive energy, irony (even towards such taboo subjects as AIDS), and most of all, self-irony, which today's LGBT activists often miss.

Within the slide collection it was possible to discern a few distinct groups of photos. Perhaps the most spectacular one is a conceptual and word-game-based sequence resembling "film credits," which was a long series of inscriptions pasted down directly onto the naked body of Waldek (Kisiel's model and lover). Besides the nude and disguise sessions, such as *Badziewianka*, *Szamanka* or *Fakir*, there are private images of the lover in the woods, a selection of snapshots taken at the nude beach in Bulgaria (Kisiel travelled a lot to the neighbouring countries of the Eastern Bloc, documenting sites of gay meetings, cruising, saunas), or photographs depicting what had been happening behind the scenes of the "proper photo sessions."

Clear references to the do-it-yourself aesthetic, the expression of sexuality deprived of prudishness (a confrontational attitude towards still-present Polish sexophobia), the

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great self-awareness and the distance—all of it made me think of Ryszard Kisiel as an authentic and extremely important point of reference. Eventually, it also resulted in inviting Kisiel to my studio in Warsaw, where after 25 years he decided to play the role of creator again. Part of the *Kisieland Project* is a soon-to-be-completed film. It brings the existing archive into dialogue with a portrait of the current Kisiel, who will once again stand face to face with a hired model. Two completely different contexts will confront each other. The story will be enlivened through the narrative and thanks to the authentic energy coming from this unusual meeting.

The *Kisieland Project* is assumed to involve

long-term activities, beginning with the conversations' recording, through the process of organizing and digitizing the slides, to making a documentary film, publishing a book, and presenting various materials in the form of exhibitions. Placing Kisiel's archive in the context of the arts is a chance to restore/reveal but also to discover its critical potential. It is also an opportunity to complement Polish visual history with hitherto ignored motifs.

Originally published in *Archiwum jako projekt: Poetyka i polityka (foto)archiwum/The Archive as Project: The Poetics and Politics of the (Photo)Archive*. Edited by

Krzysztof Pijarski. Translated by Marta Skotnicka.

Warsaw: Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii, 2011.

## Innovative Forms of Archives, Part One: Exhibitions, Events, Books, Museums, and Lia Perjovschi's Contemporary Art Archive

NATAŠA PETREŠIN-BACHELEZ

Increasing interest in organizing, structuring, documenting, and revealing the art history of the former Eastern Bloc is in large part attributable to artists who have participated actively in changing orders and elements within the visible, sayable, and thinkable, as Jacques Rancière's definition of political art has it.<sup>1</sup> Although heterogeneous in terms of formal proposals, the artistic projects that will be dealt with in this coming series have in common discursive aspects or forms of presentation that may be said to constitute "innovative forms of archives." Such a phrase is at the same time deliberately ironic, as the notion of scientific or creative innovation is necessarily followed by the well-known support structures of presentation (exhibitions, events, and so on), within whose regimes and formats the Rancièrian redistribution of the sensible takes place. On the other hand, the projects discussed here do not only represent the strategy of

self-historicization—one of the main correctives performed within an Eastern European institutional critique—but also contribute to the development of methods of artistic research and to theoretical endeavors imagining what, if anything, a shared history of European contemporary art might be.

Though an archive typically conjures up images of bookshelves, endless rows of boxes, folders, maps, and documents that sit waiting for scholars to discover and reactivate them, the term has a more flexible application within the context of critical writing. Sue Breakell has described an archive as "a set of traces of actions, the records left by a life—drawing, writing, interacting with society on personal and formal levels. In an archive, the [single document] would ideally be part of a larger body of papers including correspondence, diaries, photographs—all of which can shed light on each other."<sup>2</sup>

1 — Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 63.

2 — Sue Breakell, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive," *Tate Papers* 9 (Spring 2008), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive>.

The specific cases that will help us understand the objectives and mechanisms of archiving—not only in the former Eastern Bloc but also in the Middle East and in South America—typically employ the notion of the archive as a form, and find in this undertaking an argument for declaring the museum and the archive to be synonymous.<sup>3</sup>

Since the late 1980s, diverse motivations have inspired various forms of archives to emerge, such as Lia Perjovschi's Contemporary Art Archive / Center for Art Analysis; IRWIN's *East Art Map*; Tamás St.Auby's *Portable Intelligence Increase Museum*; Vyacheslav Akhunov's miniature reproductions of all his works in his installation *1 m2*; Walid Raad's *A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art*; and various authorless projects originating in Southeastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Of particular interest in this regard is the project *Museum of American Art* in Berlin.<sup>5</sup> Their practices have not only to do with the material found in examinations of the various personal and official archives, but also create a visual typology, offering material for further art-historical research, while at the same time experimenting with the registers involved in the presentation and interrogation of documents and other archival material whose truth values are taken for granted in the course of aggressive and continuous media pollution; and finally they contribute to prominent discourses in contemporary art today on archeological procedures and the archeological imaginary.<sup>6</sup> Such research might take the

form of an artwork, an exhibition format, or a theoretical and art-historical opus. In their presentation, they often become museum-like structures exhibiting self-institutionalizing agency, with all the accompanying knowledge produced, assembled, and transmitted to be used as a tool by an imagined or actual audience of specialists or a public. What these artists have in common is thus an adaptation of the profession of an archivist or art historian, thus gathering them under the designation "archival artists." While Hal Foster's description of artists focusing on found images, objects, and texts as making "historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" would be logical here, it remains inadequate to the scale of these artists' explicit historiographic and political endeavors.<sup>7</sup> However, Foster identifies the main issue that separates artists-as-archivists from artists-as-curators:

*That the museum has been ruined as a coherent system in a public sphere is generally assumed, not triumphantly proclaimed or melancholically pondered, and some of these artists suggest other kinds of ordering—within the museum and without. In this respect the orientation of archival art is often more "institutive" than "destructive," more "legislative" than "transgressive."<sup>8</sup>*

In the socialist and communist regimes, the official art apparatchik's interest in and tolerance for experimental art production varied from country to country, thus leading the respective scenes to develop in various directions. Information, documentation, and other printed matter circulated among groups of like-minded critics, writers, and artists, and rarely entered the official art institutions. Meanwhile, artists and directors of experimental art venues continued to collect and compile documentation to the extent of their capabilities. By the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the increasingly liberating atmosphere of what could be called "the early attempts of civil society in a socialist state" went hand in hand with underground creativity, thus giving new life to much of this documentation, as well as a flowering of intergenerational links. In many of his writings, Boris Groys has examined the mechanisms of art collections, museums, or archives

3 — The many archival approaches coming from South America will be the object of future research but cannot be specifically discussed here. For more about the archive as form in contemporary art, see Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and Monument," in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), 14–18.

4 — The term "authorless projects" for this very specific assembly of projects and exhibitions is used by Inke Arns, who curated the exhibition *What Is Modern Art? (A Group Show)* at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 2006 and edited together with Walter Benjamin the catalogue *What Is Modern Art? Introductory Series to the Modern Art 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006).

5 — Another important example, which is, however, omitted from this essay, is Polish conceptual artist Zofia Kulik, who has in several recent projects been arranging and exhibiting the archive of the Laboratory of Action, Documentation, and Promotion—PDDiU. This was an archive managed by the artistic tandem KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and her then-partner in life and art, Przemysław Kwiek) and maintained in their houses. For more on archiving strategies in Zofia Kulik's body of work, see Luiza Nader, "What Do Archives Forget? Memory and Histories," *From the Archive of KwieKulik*, in *Opowiedziane inaczej. A Story Differently Told: Tomasz Cieciarski/Jarosław Kozłowski/Zofia Kulik/Zbigniew Libera i Darek Foks/Aleksandra Polisewicz* (Gdańsk: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia, 2008), 84–122.

6 — See Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art," *e-flux journal* 4 (March 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>.

7 — Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 4.

8 — Ibid., 5.

in the former Eastern Bloc, describing how the art was created in an ideological context and not within the logic of a market, as was (and still is) the case in the West.<sup>9</sup> Instead of having their work incorporated into Western collections, the artists of the former Eastern Bloc, Groyes concludes, have created imaginary or alternative “collection-installations,” histories and narrations that fill the entirety of museum spaces. In 2006, Zdenka Badovinac curated an exhibition at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana that dealt with the artistic-archiving strategies in the former Eastern Bloc called *Interrupted Histories*. In the catalogue text, she established an important definition of the artistic process of self-historicization:

*Because the local institutions that should have been systematizing neo-avant-garde art and its tradition either did not exist or were disdainful of such art, the artists themselves were forced to be their own art historians and archivists, a situation that still exists in some places today. Such self-historicization includes the collecting and archiving of documents, whether of one's own art actions or, in certain spaces, of broader movements, ones that were usually marginalized by local politics and invisible in the international art context.*<sup>10</sup>

In the case of the Slovenian group IRWIN, this strategy was not explicitly critical, but existed in the form of a constructive or corrective approach. As Miran Mohar of the IRWIN group said with regard to institutional critique in the West, “How can you criticize something which you actually don't have?”<sup>11</sup> The main motto of IRWIN in the 1990s was “construction of one's own context,” and consequently the group itself functioned simultaneously as both observer and object of observation. This is the basis upon which we can think about the strategy of self-historicization, the artistic strategy that can furthermore be seen as one of the characteristics of an Eastern European institutional critique.<sup>12</sup>

Several years ago, Ilya Kabakov explained this artistic strategy of self-historicization as “self-description”:

*The author would imitate, re-create that very same “outside” perspective of which he was deprived in actual reality. He became simultaneously an author and an observer. Deprived of a genuine viewer, critic, or historian, the author unwittingly became them himself, trying to guess what his works meant “objectively.” He attempted to “imagine” that very “History” in which he was functioning and which was “looking” at him. Obviously, this “History” existed only in his imagination and had its own image for each artist.*<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in his most recent book *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia*, Victor Tupitsyn asks himself, “What is to be done with art that has not realized its ‘museological function’ in time, even if this is through no fault of its own?”<sup>14</sup> Tupitsyn finds egocentricity driving (Russian) artists’ increasing involvement in controlling both the selection of material as well as its interpretation: “They are attempts to reproduce the museological function (and even to replicate its institutional format) at the artists’ own expense and on their own terms.”<sup>15</sup> Thus the egocentric strategy was activated as an alternative to the institutional mechanisms, to compensate for the lack of institutional support for unofficial artistic practices—a situation we encounter throughout the former Eastern Bloc, but also in the Middle East and South America.

While Tupitsyn's view might be accurate when applied to the aspirations of neo-avant-garde artists, self-historicization is not always simply about egocentricity and paranoid control over one's own body of work, which may otherwise not be properly documented, interpreted, and presented. The projects that will be presented here as case studies<sup>16</sup> share a similar partisan spirit, one which can be conveniently explained using a notion with origins

9 — See, for example, Boris Groyes, *Logik der Sammlung. Das Ende des musealen Zeitalters* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1997).

10 — Zdenka Badovinac, “Interrupted Histories,” in *Prekinjene zgodovine / Interrupted Histories*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), n.p. [An excerpt of Badovinac's text also appears in this volume. —Ed.]

11 — Private interview with Miran Mohar, 2006.

12 — See Nataša Petrešin, “Self-Historicisation and Self-Institutionalisation as Strategies of the Institutional Critique in Eastern Europe,” in *Conceptual Artists and the Power of Their Art Works for the Present*, eds. Marina Gržinić and Alenka Domjan (Celje: Center for Contemporary Arts, 2007).

13 — Ilya Kabakov, “Foreword,” in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, eds. Laura J. Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 7–8.

14 — Victor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 230.

15 — Ibid.

16 — [While the present excerpt is limited to part 1 of Petrešin-Bachelez's original text, part 2 includes discussion of the work of the IRWIN group and Tamás St.Auby, which the author uses to further advance the arguments presented here. —Ed.]



in online Open Access or Open Archives initiatives: self-archiving.<sup>17</sup> Self-archiving involves depositing a free copy of a digital document on the Web in order to allow access to it, with these documents usually being peer-reviewed research papers, conference papers, or theses posted on the website of the author's own institution. Formulating this notion within the broader context of knowledge production in general, self-archiving or innovative forms of archives help to raise questions of inclusion and exclusion, and of the right to think and to participate in restricted knowledge communities.

Closely linked to this, and serving to differentiate between the chosen case studies, is an attention to their various fictionalizing or documentary capacities. The ontological status of the source and of the document as indices of authenticity is brought into the discussion, as will be seen in the cases of the projects of Walid Raad and the "authorless projects," where fictional identities and invented documents playfully disturb canons of knowledge and histories previously considered as solid, unmovable rocks.

**Lia Perjovschi:  
Contemporary Art Archive, 1990–**

Starting with her performances in her Bucharest apartment in the 1980s, under one of the most repressive regimes in Europe, Lia Perjovschi's activities created a space of resistance. From body art she switched to researching the body of international art, said husband Dan Perjovschi about the change in her practice. Her curiosity and desire to understand, recuperate, discuss, share, and coach found its way to a general audience. Her installations took the form of open spaces, discussion areas, reading rooms, waiting rooms, meeting rooms. Books, slides, photocopies, files, postcards, printed matter about international as well as Romanian contemporary art began to be organized and assembled in logical order. Lia also produced exhaustive drawings and texts aimed at compiling all possible information about the Western history of contemporary art, calling her products "Subjective Art History."

After the revolution, in the early 1990s, equipped with unstoppable optimism and

enthusiasm for the future, Lia and Dan used their studio to found the Contemporary Art Archive, a collection of magazine issues, book publications, and reproductions. By the end of the 1990s, the CAA became a valuable database for alternative art initiatives everywhere, a self-supporting archive created outside the state funding network. Besides issuing cheaply designed publications meant to inform and to classify various art movements and tendencies on the basis of their archival material, the CAA organized several exhibitions paired with open discussions or lectures. In 2003, the CAA modified its function and has since operated under the title Center for Art Analysis. Lia describes herself as a "Detective in Art," reading, copying, cutting, and remixing texts, concepts, and images. As Dan Perjovschi put it, "Her Museum in files is not stuck on the shelves and is never closed . . . The knowledge of international art practice that she brought together helped to develop local criticism."

Lia emphasizes the most important activities an archive can foster: sharing and teaching. While it was practically forbidden to share books, ideas, and information during the communist regime, she understood that a shared idea brings about another idea and that sharing is an essential survival strategy. This was certainly the case when communism developed formal institutions that were so absurd that people avoided them altogether, replacing them with informal institutions (alternative economies and structures, the black market), strategies that continue to thrive as postcommunist attempts at building faith through the mimicry of neoliberal models have proven neither promising nor trustworthy.

In the catalogue of the exhibition *Again for Tomorrow*, organized by the MA curatorial students at the Royal College of Art in London and featuring the artists of the Buenos Aires artist cooperative Trama, Claudia Fontes, who founded Trama in 2000, speaks of the survival strategy that stimulates one to build an archive in a context where memory is under constant threat: "When an archive's latent content is organised and distributed through a network-like structure, a powerful potential is unleashed. Transparency and a willingness to share information give rise to trust, and trust is known to be the basic condition that keeps any network alive."<sup>18</sup>

17 — In an e-mail conversation, Sven Spieker, author of an influential book examining the archive as a crucible of twentieth-century art — *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008) — suggested an umbrella term, "self-archive," for the cases discussed in this very article.

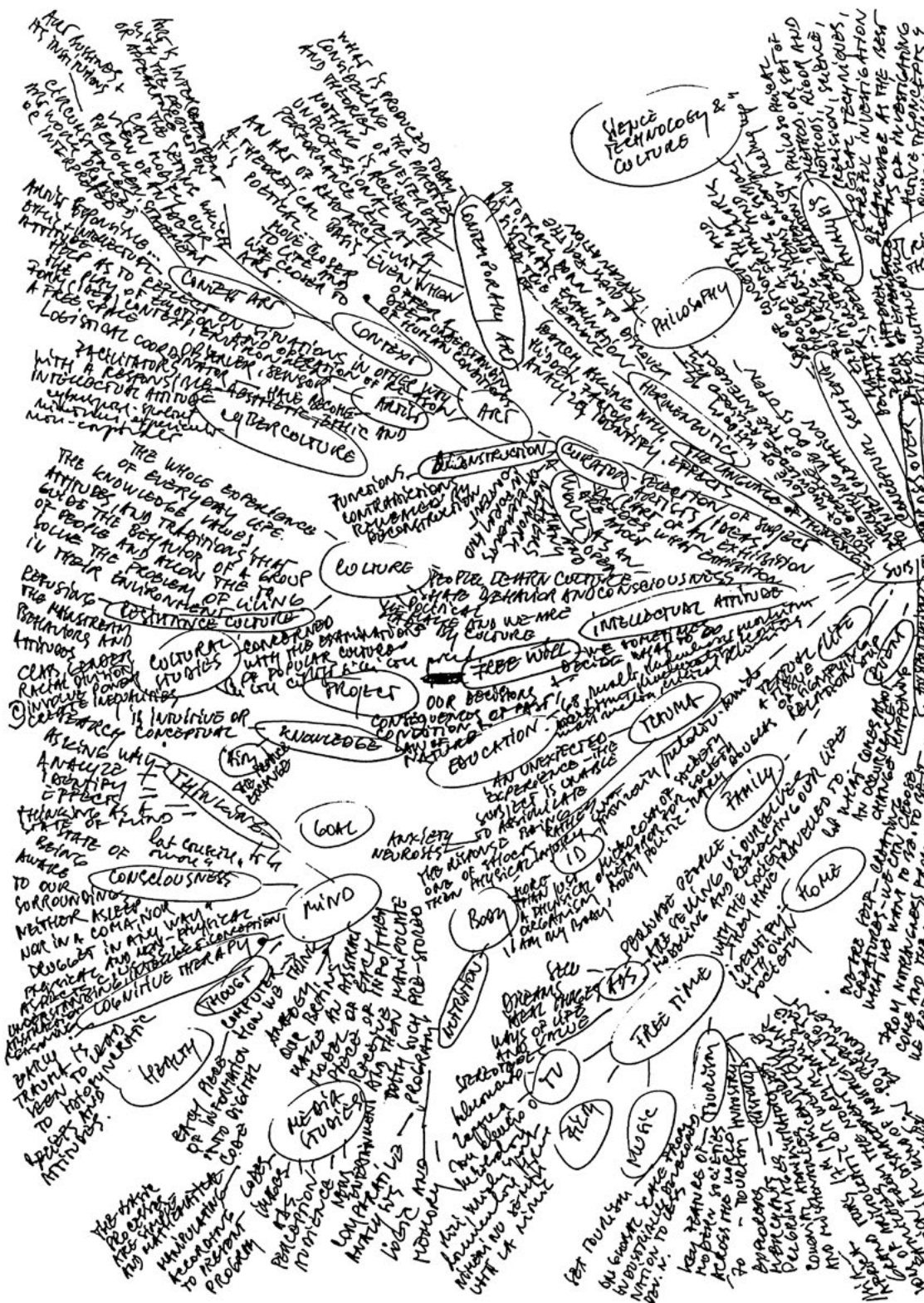
18 — Claudia Fontes, "London Calling," in *Again for Tomorrow* (London: Royal College of Art, 2006), 129.

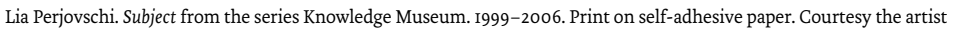
Claudia Fontes points to how Perjovschi went from total mistrust to building up a powerful matrix of knowledge to be shared and updated through a process of ongoing discussions, lectures, exhibitions, and exchanges. Fontes also points to a further comparison with Graciela Carnevale's archive of the Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia de Rosario, started in the late 1960s, finding in both of these examples evidence of resistance in which a notion of archiving becomes a survival strategy, even in very different political (and authoritarian) contexts.

In the past few years, Lia has been working on and exhibiting *Plans for a Knowledge Museum*, an imaginary museum based on files accumulated

over her years at the CAA. Characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, this future artist-run museum is dedicated to moving away from the logic of the exhibition-as-spectacle, and towards a learning process of working with an open-structured archive. Installation of these *Plans for a Knowledge Museum* comprises drawings, objects, charts, photos, and color prints. This material is there for viewers to hold and make use of, much like the notion of self-archiving mentioned above. As we will see in the next installment, this attitude of openness also corresponds to the aspirations of IRWIN's ongoing project *East Art Map*.

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# **After the Fall: Democracy and Its Discontents**



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# Introduction

BORIS BUDEN

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## **What Hegel once said about truth could be as well ascribed today to democracy**

in Eastern Europe, namely, that it has turned stale. In fact, Hegel had in mind a simple subjective truth, the one grounded in the certainty of our senses, which is why it could be apprehended without altering anything in it and even without comprehending it. However, after it is subjected to a complex process of mediation, this simple truth loses its immediate certainty, becomes outdated in a way, or in Hegel's original phrase, "stale." This is precisely what has happened to democracy less than thirty years after the fall of communism: it has lost that sensuous certainty, which it had enjoyed at the moment of the so-called democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, when it seemed that its values and principles were instantly accepted by the broadest masses and directly applied in their social reality. It was a time when almost everyone could experience democracy as an authentic quality of their own real life and consume it without ifs or buts, a time when people truly felt that their voice was heard and their will respected, and when even the last and least members of society believed they had rights equal to everyone else's. What we usually call the democratic ideal, meaning a certain normative quality that guides our will in the "dirt" of everyday politics but can never be fully realized in the actuality of historical praxis, was perceived back then as a bare fact. In short, at the moment of the historical turn of 1989, democracy entered the ruin of Eastern European communism in the form of its simple immediacy. This, however, couldn't last for long. Once it started its real life, democracy was inevitably exposed to a series of ideological mediations in which it was gradually stripped of all its angelic purity.

The first was a deeply problematic relation to its ideological counterpart, the so-called totalitarianism. When democracy arrived on the scene in 1989–90, it was not only bringing its freedoms and rights as something new in Eastern Europe, it was also replacing the collapsing *ancien régime*, whose historical character was subsumed under the notion of totalitarian rule. It was this stark contrast between democracy and totalitarianism, a totally simplified black-and-white distinction with no gray nuances in between, that essentially determined this particular historical moment and introduced a radical discontinuity with the past. As a result, the whole space of the former communist East suddenly appeared as miraculously unified under a single common experience, the experience of totalitarianism. Yet, besides various cliché-ridden stories of national victimization, mostly presented as some sort of cultural memory and misused for cheap political gains, there was not much historical content inside. It was an experience emptied of all the flesh and blood of history, of all the dramatic inner contradictions of historical communism, of the severest ideological and political clashes among its many factions, of the huge diversity of its theoretical concepts and sociopolitical practices, including essential differences in the form of property relations, the role of state, the status of culture and arts, or in geopolitical principles. But, above all, this experience was emptied of what is truly essential about history, namely, its intrinsic contingency, that is, the often tragic awareness that the course of events could have been different than it really was. Instead, history was reduced to a bare past witnessing of nothing else but a senseless failure that is not worth remembering at all.

So why has democracy, upon entering the postcommunist East, so quickly abandoned its own historical consciousness? The answer is both simple and scary: because it was not able to get rid of its own traumatic past, specifically, the legacy of European colonialism that has been haunting it ever since the ideas of freedom and equality emerged as a political force at the end of the eighteenth century. It is because of this colonial legacy, which democracy has never properly reflected upon and politically recognized, that to this day it perceives its Other as having no history of its own. This is what made it possible for democracy to arrive in the East in 1989 as a newcomer in a space of ahistorical otherness, where it could fulfill its mission of implementing its rights and freedoms in the hearts and minds of the natives who were blessed in a complete ignorance of their own history. It is therefore no wonder that this space so quickly turned into a breeding ground for new, now democratically legitimized, forms of oppression. But this leads us to the second stage of mediation to which democracy has been exposed upon its arrival into the postcommunist East.

The problem is that democracy in its idealized form has, in fact, never entered Eastern Europe. A *Western* democracy did instead. Despite all of its universal claims, it appeared in the East as culturally particularized, that is, as having its origin and its proper shape in the West. Consequently, the supposed democratization has become a mere moment in a broader historical process of Westernization, or in more general terms, of an expansion of Western modernity into the East. Getting a supporting role in this much broader cultural—or should we say, civilizational—mission, the process of democratization of the East has been additionally tasked with the trauma of dealing with cultural difference, which, curiously, also implied a peculiar temporal delay. The East was now more than a simple cultural Other. At the same time, it was perceived as “not-yet-West,” and, accordingly, it was expected to catch up with the world’s most powerful normative bloc. More precisely, it was supposed to catch up with the modernist development it had “missed” due to communism, which was presented as an antimodernist historical force, or at least as a major obstacle to the “normal” modernist development that had succeeded so brilliantly in the West. This, however, had a further implication. Within the same cultural paradigm, the East was redefined in terms of its belatedness, as a space of belated modernity. This meant that even after 1989, the West and the East haven’t shared one and the same historical temporality. While the former was always on time and, in that sense, presumed as timeless (i.e., posthistorical), the latter, now measuring its historical time only according to the West, was chronically late. As a consequence, democracy found itself caught in a sort of temporal gap, stretched between two different temporalities. This is why we might say that it has never really arrived in the East. Rather, it is still in the process of arriving there, a process whose scopes and limits are purely arbitrary. Political scientists, or in this case those whom we might instead call “the ideologues of Westernization,” have found a proper name for this condition: transition to democracy. Not only has “transition” further degraded the original project of the democratization of the postcommunist East into a mere means to an end, which is the cultural, economic, and geopolitical realignment of the whole area into the sphere of Western interests, it tacitly implies a weird idea of an “Eastern democracy,” which is a sort of would-be democracy desperately striving to become a proper Western one. This idea perfectly corresponds to an already coined, no less weird notion of a “former East.” Like a tiger that cannot change its stripes, the East cannot get rid of its past, existing now in the form of its never-ending “afterlife.” Is this really what democracy in Eastern Europe is all about—an afterlife of communism? True, this is nonsense, but unfortunately it accurately describes the reality on the ground.

And finally, democracy didn't come to the postcommunist East alone. It was accompanied by a fellow, whom back then nobody seems to have noticed and of whom hardly a word was said. It was capitalism. In 1989, both capitalism and democracy arrived in the East side by side as a perfect couple. But while democracy was parading in the limelight of the great historical event, the other half of the couple did its job backstage: the privatization—mostly criminal—of former socialist property, which generated a new, powerful stage of postcommunist primitive accumulation with disastrous social and moral consequences. And while democracy was desperately struggling to gain a foothold in the institutions and civil societies of the East, capitalism, in its most predatory neoliberal form, has not only quickly dismantled the leftovers of the former socialist welfare state but destroyed society as such. Finally, while democracy has continued to work hard on the catching-up of the East with the West, capitalism has long been celebrating the full integration of the former socialist economies into global capitalism, which paved the way for a no-holds-barred extraction of all the human and natural resources of the postcommunist East.

This third mediation to which democracy has been exposed upon its arrival to Eastern Europe, its dirty liaison with contemporary neoliberal capitalism, seems to have been not only its most fateful but also the one almost totally foreclosed, which is why we are not able to ask even the simplest question: If democracy and capitalism are such an unequal couple, why is there still so much trust that they will ultimately stay together? Why is it so hard to imagine that one of them—the stronger, more successful one, but also the one more brutal and egoistic—sooner or later won't go down its own path? In fact, this is already happening, and not only in postcommunist Eastern Europe.

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## Summary of Critical Texts

KIM CONATY

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**With the breakdown of the socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe around 1989,** a desire to “catch up with the West” in the realms of politics, economics, and culture became a popular driver among many former Eastern bloc nations. Today, nearly three decades later, we understand this objective to have been part of a broader belief—ultimately rife with conflict and contradictions—that Western democracy should be the model for this diverse region and that the transition would be one of straightforward assimilation and convergence. This chapter brings together key voices from the region whose texts—which span more than a decade, from 2001 to 2012—theorize the effects of these transitions and address the redefinition of “Central and Eastern Europe” in civil society and in art. The title of the chapter, a reference to Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), suggests a contested relationship between the individual and the ideology of democracy itself. The writings herein draw out this dialectic by investigating questions relating to identity, colonialism, and history.

Several texts consider how the Cold War period is historicized, and how this might relate to changing notions of democracy. Writing in 2010, Vít Havránek explains that one of the critical effects of the fall of communism was the resultant dissolution of the

East-West binary system, within which each side was defined in relation to the other. His text seeks to redefine this “bipolarity” by proposing a postcolonialist rather than essentialist reading of work produced behind the Iron Curtain. Rastko Močnik critiques the way that the East has been conceptualized via the so-called “fall of communism” paradigm, which dehistoricizes the past from which it derives. Instead, he argues for an integrated historical account in which the past might be explained with knowledge of the present, and in which “the past of the East may be the collective future of the West.” Georg Schöllhammer takes up the concept of the “former West,” a provocation set forth in the early 2000s that criticized the reliance on the term “former East” for its one-sided assessment of the complex political power dynamics at play. For Schöllhammer, the debate over these terms becomes a point of departure as he urges individuals to assume more agency in determining their attitudes towards dominant power structures.

Texts by Boris Groys and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, on the other hand, continue to find justification for the notion of “Eastern Europe.” Groys, writing in 2003, argues that Eastern European art should be distinguished as such on the basis of its emergence from the Cold War geopolitical context. “The true specificity of Eastern Europe,” he notes, “can only reside in its communist past.” He complicates a simplistic reading of the communist project, however, by aligning it with many of the same tenets of Western modernism, such as globalization, progress, and a drive towards the future. Writing eight years later, in 2011, Țichindeleanu continues to justify the concept of “Eastern Europe,” proposing the development of a critical theory and practice of postcommunism that would reflect on “the power of capital and the coloniality of power.” In so doing, he turns these modernist criteria into subjects of debate.

Identity politics is a recurring topic throughout the chapter, as individuals—long defined along an East-West binary—negotiated a disorienting situation at once tied to a communist past and dependent on recently opened Western markets. The occasion of the Venice Biennale, the major international art exhibition that puts national pavilions on the world’s stage, provided the platform for two of the chapter’s texts. Marius Babias’s essay for the 2005 Romanian Pavilion proposes identity politics as an effective tool to avoid the rampant essentialism so common to cultural readings of the East. One of the key early investigations of the complex relationship between the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe, Babias’s text posits that anticommunism on the part of the West has served as a critical ideological agent in the reductivist shaping of so-called Eastern Europe. The dialogue between artist duo Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas and curator Cristina Ricupero, published for the Lithuanian Pavilion in 2007, offers a personal reflection on the negotiation between representing one’s nation and remaining critical of that power. The Urbonases’ project, *Villa Lituania*, offers a rich case study in its consideration of the relationship between public space and Lithuanian identity; by responding to their nation’s lack of a permanent pavilion in Venice, the artists modeled a diplomatic situation and simultaneously engaged in one.

The final text in this chapter, by the late Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović, offers a polemical proposition on the topic of democracy, art, and the East: “Art needs no state. The same goes for artists.” Written for a lecture-performance in 2004 commissioned by the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana in response to Slovenia’s entrance into the European Union, Stilinović’s text imagines the roles of artists, institutions, administration, and authority in this new political reality, while emphasizing the absurdity of the transition itself—how can a country enter Europe if it is already there?

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# Conversation

ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI WITH PAULINA POBOCHA

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**PAULINA POBOCHA:** The outset of your career coincided with the fall of communism and Poland's embrace of democracy thereafter. Could you reflect on the first years of a democratic Poland and the effect this context had on your work, which from its beginning has deployed and interrogated social relations as subject matter?

**ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI:** The fall of communism was not “the beginning of democracy” in Poland—it was the beginning of the brutal fight between political forces that wanted to define what democracy is. Each of these forces wanted to define the constitutional system, economic system, system of political exchange, and the system of dominant moral values. Artists and other culture workers wanted to take part in this early process of “programming” the country. So artists who for the first time were able to speak openly started to be disciplined according to dominant moral strictures—by the media and by politicians [who were allied with Catholic fundamentalists]. I used this freedom of speech, which at the time was still being debated rather than controlled. We have a slightly different situation today [ever since the right-wing Law and Justice Party assumed power in 2015]—mainstream politicians try to control culture, as they try to control the entire field where politics, culture, science, religion, and so on operate as “autonomous” entities. There was a leftist idea that everything is political, so everything can be debated. This idea was stolen by the populists, but they changed the meaning of politics itself: it's not a debate anymore, it's control and punishment. So if everything is political, everything should be controlled.

**PP:** When did you become interested in manifesting your own political views?

**AZ:** It was an evolution. There wasn't one single moment when I started to think I wanted to be viewed politically. Of course, I was interested in politics, because of this special period of time in which I started my career, after the Wall and immediately after the collapse of the communist system in Poland. I was witness to all these changes.

**PP:** You have often attempted to show these changes in your work, in your movie *Them* [2007], for example.

**AZ:** There was a growing political fever, if you will, during the post-Soviet transformations in Poland and elsewhere; mainstream politicians had ample opportunity to vent their heated views, but that was not the case for many ordinary people. So I made a movie, *Them*, in which four groups of radicals fight together on a symbolic battlefield, where they are able to show all their roiling emotions while clarifying and polishing their political views.

**PP:** You also decided to present your own political views—was that difficult?

**AZ:** It was not easy to declare, as an artist, my own political views. The general understanding was that artists should be apolitical; they shouldn't talk about politics because it's dirty and it's busy with temporal problems, which will disappear in a moment or be replaced by other problems. Artists should be dealing instead with eternal themes—love, death, the human condition. There was a certain shame in saying, “I'm very much interested in politics. Maybe politics is even more important than art. It's a social discourse that creates a field to discuss all other issues, or it's manipulated to block such a discussion.” Sławek





Artur Żmijewski. *Democracies*. 2009. Twenty-channel video (color, sound), 146 min.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty-First Century. Courtesy the artist;  
Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw; Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

Sierakowski, the head of [the left-wing group] Krytyka Polityczna [Political Critique] really supported me, because there were no other people who were ready to support me in such a declaration that, yes, politics should be a topic for art. The artist is also a political actor. Art institutions play political games and can be a political force, a place for debate.

**PP: In 2006 you published the essay “The Applied Social Arts,” which advocates for an art capable of social impact. Was the essay prompted by any particular shifts you detected in the sociopolitical landscape of Poland at the time or in the art that was then being made?**

AZ: Around 2005, I became more firmly committed to the idea that art can effectively concern itself with political problems. I was invited by Sławek Sierakowski to write an essay about it. I had met Sławek a few months before in the small city of Łagowo during its film festival—it was not a celebrity-style festival; it was a laboratory of filmmakers. We started to talk about political issues. He found out that I’m interested in this topic; I found out that it’s interesting for me to talk to him about politics. It was a telling moment for me. I developed the idea of political involvement after that. Art was used in the past by politicians for their ideological fight because culture/art can be very influential. Art “manipulates” emotions; it’s not rational discourse—it has a much more direct impact than rationality. The alternative idea could be that artists and cultural institutions themselves decide the potential political use of art’s authority.

**PP: Your essay was met with criticism. The commingling of art and politics, or art and political activism, sometimes creates discomfort. In Poland and elsewhere in the broader region, there is a very specific history of art being deployed for political purposes by the state. Of course, there are also many rich traditions of political art being made to critique the dominant power—art of resistance—which is political by nature and difficult to co-opt.**

AZ: Yes, here in Eastern Europe there is the memory of art as propaganda. Art and artists were used by the state to convert people into followers of communist ideology, to trust the new rulers of the Eastern bloc and their inhumane regimes in the ’50s, ’60s, and later on. It was exactly the issue taken up in “The Applied Social Arts”:

- Art could be “used” as a political tool, but the obstacle to doing so is the shame from the past when art lost its freedom and was transformed into propaganda;
- the awareness of this shame could, in fact, allow artists to take the step forward and use their art as a political tool again (if some of them want to, of course);
- this time the autonomy of the artist could be instrumentalized by the artists themselves, not by the state regimes;
- the essay also presented a wish to make possible art activity that could generate visible social effects—so, from aesthetic forms to real results.

**PP: What you say implicitly brings to the fore the critical differences between the democratic system and the totalitarian regime that it replaced, and it suggests the difficulties for artists and others to pass from one to the other and to do so in a compressed period of time—in our case, let’s say the decade of the 1990s—a time frame that may not have allowed for coming to terms with the “shame of the past,” as you say. In that case, “The Applied Social Arts” may have reached an audience not ready for its content. Could you speak to the role of art institutions in this exchange?**



AZ: It's much easier for individual artists to make decisions about their political roles than it is for art institutions. People who work in institutions, which in fact carry a lot of influence, prefer to avoid political involvement and political responsibility. They reduce things to the basic level that "we educate society, but we don't play any political role. We don't support any political view: we are not liberals, not socialists, not leftists, and not rightists. We are purely apolitical." Being apolitical became the political stance of the art institutions.

**PP: Is this due to how art institutions in Poland are funded?**

AZ: Institutions depend on state funds. Also, a conservative model of museums and art institutions dominates—I mean, the idea that a museum should be reduced to collecting and presenting different phenomena. The art institution is allowed to present art about politics, but not to be involved in political acts. In Poland, the art historian Piotr Piotrowski had an idea for the National Museum in Warsaw to be an entity involved in current political debates. The name for such an institution would be Critical Museum. When he was the director of the National Museum, he made a statement in the form of a big show about gay and lesbian life and culture, a manifestation of his idea that the institution could be politically involved. Unfortunately, he was fired by the advisory board of the museum. So it's possible to find examples of the political involvement of art institutions and museums, even if they are financed by state money, even if they depend on the Ministry of Culture or receive money from the local government. Piotrowski's concept showed that it's possible to transform a conservative museum of fine art into an active player in political debate in the country, though Piotrowski paid a price for it.

**PP: The Berlin Biennale you organized took place in 2012. In the years since, and within Poland, would you say the reluctance of artists to engage politically continues? Or is there more engagement?**

AZ: Not really. In Poland, people are afraid that the government's cultural policy will be similar to Hungary's, where Viktor Orbán has transformed important museums, such as the Ludwig Museum or Műcsarnok, into unimportant institutions.

While people are politicized nowadays, they still don't know how to protect themselves, how to use the power they have, the institutional power. They don't know how to use all this capital, and all the resources they have to conduct political activity. They would rather try to adapt than resist. Even if they are different [than during the communist era], even if they are much more aware of their rights, of the political situation, political rioting, political brutality, still there is a certain passivity, and people don't know how to act.

**PP: As the situation gets worse, it would seem there's more incentive to act politically.**

AZ: We have all these right-wing populists becoming prime ministers and presidents. In many countries, and in important countries like the U.S., people are in quite similar situations. In the next few years, when the crises will be deeper and the political situation much more difficult, people will try to develop strategies of resistance, or maybe strategies of doing something effective to counter this situation, but they may not be able to. There are not many good strategies of resistance now; the only working strategy at the moment is to mount big protests. But even if you present your power, politicians who behave like desperados will continue to behave like desperados, even if the only horizon is a cul-de-sac. It looks like they love hazardous games. I think that the only way is to create a political party and start to confront the social and political situation directly. But that is a life's project, and we don't have an alternative life. I'd like somehow to reduce the "quantity" of politics in my life, and in human life in general.

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# The Post-Bipolar Order and the Status of Public and Private under Communism

VÍT HAVRÁNEK

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## The Post-Bipolar Order

The fall of communism (1989) followed by the fragmentation of Eastern Europe was an eruptive event; in the process, collective emotions and phantasms that had been accumulated, suppressed and displaced both consciously and unconsciously became agents which catalysed real events. The compensatory effect of forty years of Soviet colonisation directed the desires of Eastern Europe in one direction alone—towards the West, which became the main vanishing point of transformational dreams and endeavours. “Catching up with the West” was the main aim of post-colonial countries in transformation.

At this time, the West was dealing with a different problem brought by the fall of communism—namely, the loss of its own alternative and of the polarity it had known. Let us not forget that Marxism and the idea of a socially just society was a project of Western political theory. Its demise also brought about the downfall of a binary system whose repellent and attractive forces were structured by both East and West. The structure of the First (West) and Second (East) worlds produced a whole series of antitheses: communism vs. capitalism, totalitarianism vs. democracy, lack of freedom vs. freedom, alternatives vs. a continuous order, justice vs. exploitation, idealism vs. pragmatism, and so on. The fact that half of this binary system no longer existed after the fall of communism destabilised the identity of the West, which had drawn its identity and hegemony from this bipolarity.

The loss of its obverse face, in whose utopian justice the West recognised itself, and a fascination with the notion of catching up with the West, went hand in hand with the process of the absorption of the Second World into the First. Today, the Second World no longer exists; it has become part of a new (First?) World. However, its absorption transformed the First World, for it brought its own colonial past along with its post-colonial present and all the concomitant traumas. The essentialisation of this bipolarity to which both the West and the East became victims overlooked the existence of the Third and Fourth worlds and continues to

do so. Indeed, during the Cold War the Third World had been a matter of dispute in the power struggle between both colonial empires. This study will attempt to break free from this essential East-West bipolarity and view the art of the Eastern satellite countries with which we will be dealing here from a post-colonial standpoint. As the post-colonial Second World blended into the First, it found an explanation for its own colonial past in the present, beyond the former bipolarity—in its reflections on the effects of the colonisation of the Third and Fourth worlds.

## The Eastern Bloc

The Soviet colonial empire known as the Eastern Bloc was composed of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (comprising fifteen Soviet republics, some of which were the result of two hundred years of colonialism going back to the times of the Russian Czars) and eight satellite countries joined to the Soviet Union on the basis of the Yalta Conference, which established the distribution of the world following the Second World War (the Baltic states became federal parts of the Soviet state). Geographically, the Eastern Bloc spread across two continents and encompassed dozens of ethnicities and cultures. Nonetheless, the area seemed to be homogeneous. How could that be so?

The self-definition of the colonising Russian culture was not itself the main factor behind that homogenisation, as was the case in the Western cases of colonisation. On the contrary, the Russian self-definition was ambivalent and oscillated between “Europeanness” and “Asian otherness.”<sup>1</sup> This is why one of the traits which marked the relationship between the coloniser and its satellites in Europe was an ambivalence between feelings of cultural dominance and feelings of cultural inferiority. This cultural inferiority was grounded in the fact that these cultures belonged among those of the West, which Russian and Soviet culture had trouble identifying with—on one hand

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1 — David Chioni Moore, “Is the ‘Post-’ in Postcolonial the ‘Post-’ in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *Baltic Postcolonialism* (Amsterdam: Violeta Kelertas, 2006), pp. 11–43.

it imitated and identified with it, and on the other it stressed a romantic otherness which was almost revolutionary.

Although the Soviet state did homogenise its colonial empire by means of the Russian language—that is, by means of an essential element of the coloniser’s culture—the main form of colonisation was based on ideology. This ideological colonisation took the form of a violent turn towards a faith which, in the case of communist ideology, was grounded in the conviction of communism’s historical superiority. The communist ideological colonisation did not *a priori* suppress national states as such, and it did not have any underlying ethnic or racial essence; it was a multinational construction.<sup>2</sup> It was this violent ideological effort which was the source from which the homogenisation of the whole area drew.

By contrast, Soviet executive colonial power manifested itself across the Eastern Bloc unevenly, because it colonised countries not through direct governance, but by establishing, controlling and overseeing national governments which were subordinated to the centre in differing degrees. People’s everyday lives in the empire were managed by state government apparatuses. The “paternal nation,” along with the state apparatuses of each country, administered and adapted the colonial ideology locally according to its own needs and local conditions,<sup>3</sup> translating local languages into local laws and norms by means of which it governed each country’s people, who were not in direct contact with the Soviet coloniser but with the local government apparatus (this is why communism degenerated into a virtual ideology). In the Czech foreword to A. A. Zhdanov on Art, a book which argued for direct party control of the production of art (the Zhdanov Doctrine), local commentator F. Nečásek does not speak of a “new” Marxist-Leninist art. He says, “In artistic and aesthetic questions as well, it is possible today to measure the progressiveness and sincerity of the artist’s relationship with socialism and Soviet art”; in other words, he—a colonised man—aligns the supra-national ideology of the coloniser with the national means of control (power, language, etc.), thus creating a direct power threat. According to him, the polemic with socialism entails a conflict with the coloniser’s national power apparatus (“If you’re not

with us, you’re against us”). Examining the separate self-colonisation and separate discourses of opposition in each satellite country is of the utmost importance for interpreting art because, firstly, it establishes the *a priori* national differences between countries (compare E. Hoxha, Tito, Dubček, Ceaușescu, etc.); secondly, it brings us face to face with a double colonisation.

In the satellite states, people were colonised twice—first,<sup>4</sup> as historical victims of the post-war world which fell to their liberators, divested of their existing state administrations and forcibly oriented toward the historically higher-ranking ideology of communism (horizontally) and, second, in a differentiated fashion, by means of their own communist agitators and governments, in whose hands they were subjected to a differentiated national self-colonisation (vertically).<sup>5</sup>

Distinguishing between these two colonising currents will help us to differentiate among a series of processes and particularities.

[...]

#### Public and Private Sites of Resistance in the 1960s

During his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava (1959–65), Július Koller made an abstract painting in his atelier at school. When his teacher Ján Želibský—who had studied in Prague during the 1930s with a former member of the avant-garde group known as Osma and eventually became one of the leading representatives of the social configuration before the war—saw the painting, he admonished Koller sharply and warned him that such aberrations would not be tolerated at the Academy for political reasons, and if he wanted to stay, he would have to paint that type of picture at home and nowhere else. Koller’s recollection of this event, which probably took place in 1963, has an allegorical dimension, for it confronts us with a newly delineated set of relations between the collective and the private, control and self-control, and the public and a virtual public. First, let us note that abstract art as a “language” had the character of a counter-discourse. Painting abstract forms (as against those envisioned by socialist or any other type of realism) was a symbolic form of resistance

2 — Viktor Misiano, *Progressive Nostalgia: Contemporary Art from the Former USSR* (Moscow, 2008).

3 — From Maoist dictatorship to socialism in the styles of Tito, Dubček, or Gorbachev.

4 — The term “self-colonisation,” which I know from texts by Alexander Kiossev, is used in a different sense here—in my sense, people do not colonise unconsciously; instead, they consciously adapt the coloniser’s ideology to local circumstances.

5 — See Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (1967) and *The Curtain* (2005), for example.

which nevertheless was not prohibited (in Czechoslovakia in 1963) as such. The ban on abstract painting was not justified on ideological grounds (as it had been in the 1950s), but on the basis of the adaptive norms which held good for the public sphere. This ban, we may note, did not apply to the private sphere, where the artist could do what he or she wanted. The logical result was a shift of symbolic resistance and artistic creation into private spheres in which art no longer had the feedback of the public or of critics.

Boris Groys posits an ideological polarity between artistic production in the capitalist system, based on private ownership, production processes and the labour exchanges, and artistic production in the communist project, based on the idea of collective ownership.<sup>6</sup> Under capitalism, artistic production is impossible outside the artistic market, which inexorably commodifies art, regardless of a person's intentions. The communist project is based on the "power of vision," from which the state derives "direct political propaganda."

Under real socialism—a preliminary phase on the way toward communism—most forms of ownership were nationalised: factories, workshops, offices, land, houses, cultural and public buildings, private properties and, naturally, "public spaces" as well. Thus in the ideological understanding of the world—with certain exceptions—all physical spaces in the communist sphere were the common property of the working class<sup>7</sup> and thus spaces potentially available for artistic interventions.<sup>8</sup>

However, the public spaces generated by totalitarian power structures were spaces for "empty gestures," spaces for "adaptation," spaces for the publicly visible symbolic subordination of the differentiated norms of colonisation. In the essay "The Power of the Powerless" (1978), Václav Havel illustrated the individual's subjection to the system using the example of a greengrocer who hangs a sign bearing an empty slogan which reads "Proletarians of all lands unite!" in his shop window, even though neither he nor any one of the passersby believe in it.<sup>9</sup> By doing

so, he means to say, "I am willing to uphold the status quo, to adapt and to submit to whatever the system requires of me; in exchange, don't touch my private sphere." In his essay "On Emptiness," Ilya Kabakov describes the public sphere—which he calls "emptiness"—using a masterful allegory:

*All the streets, motorways and pavements of each island, village and town are filled with thousands of people rushing from one burrow to the next [...] What name do the islanders use to describe the experience of emptiness? For the burrow dwellers, this act of naming is connected with the idea of the "state system" [...] The "state system" in the topography of this place is whatever lies all around the burrow dwellers and amongst them [...] it is that which fills all the spaces between the burrows and the thoroughfares that join them. In short, it is everything which embodies the emptiness which lies within its scope and expresses it.<sup>10</sup>*

Through its apparatuses, the state became the owner of everything—perhaps with the exception of personal items and the domestic sphere which people established in their private (albeit state-owned) flats. As can be seen in Kabakov's allegory—which was formulated at the very centre of ideological and colonial power, in Moscow—the individual latched on to all that was left after the public sphere had been emptied out: the private space of the "burrow."

Living the counter-discourse was not easy in the West, either. In the case of the totalitarian system in the East, the counter-discourse was shunted off into private "illegality," and if it did not give up its aspirations of contravening the norms of the public sphere, it would be set upon by the courts and condemned on the basis of higher ideological principles. The West differed from totalitarianism with its long history and the present potentiality (whether this involved art markets or systems of social norms) of the establishment to always absorb the counter-discourse into itself again and again. As Boris Groys affirms concerning the case of art, the catalyst for this absorption was—and still is—the capitalist system of ownership, which is even able to commodify immateriality.

The members of the Croatian Gorgona group were distinctive individual artists and

6 — Boris Groys, *ART Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

7 — People were often referred to as "working class" in connection with property.

8 — In the 1960s the idea of the total appropriation of public spaces through avant-garde art experienced a short-lived revival through the kinetic light performances of the Dviženije Group, for example.

9 — The greengrocer in his state-owned shop was, in his day, one of the symbols of a subtle corruption; he was able to use his position to secure advantages over other workers.

10 — Ilya Kabakov, "On the Subject of 'the Void,'" Boris Groys (ed.), *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008).

architects who led their own public artistic lives independently. The secret organisation was united around an interest in art, which was the “only and exclusive field of Gorgona’s interest.”<sup>11</sup> Josip Vaništa wrote in a 1961 text, “Gorgona does not demand that art should result in an artwork or anything else.” This was a very radical artistic proclamation which best illustrates the point of the group’s existence: “Gorgonisation.” “Gorgonisation” was a group activity, both discursive and textual (questionnaires, letters, hypotheses), which took place only among members of the group in closed places, and there was no requirement that it should lead to the production of a real or realisable work. Their activities were rarely held in public (an example would be the performative play performed at an exhibition by Julije Knifer at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Zagreb, 1966). The eleven issues of *Gorgona*, conceived as an artists’ magazine, represented a surprising, monumental departure for the group. The magazine’s format was unified, but otherwise the invitation to participate entailed the freedom to conceive of the publications according to the views of the members of Gorgona and the invited artists (Josip Vaništa, Julije Knifer, Marijan Jevšovar, Victor Vasarely, Ivan Kožarič, Miljenko Horvath, Harold Pinter, Dieter Roth). This was captured in the declaration, “Gorgonism is defined as the sum of all possible interpretations.”

With the radical criticism of the need to produce material and immaterial works (shows) and the announcement that its main activity was holding closed group debates on art, Gorgona consciously adopted a position of “unworkable” activities that could not be exhibited. This group interiorisation of art, this withdrawal from the public sphere, was related to the political situation, as Vaništa noted: “In 1961, when communism was strong, Gorgona began to retreat into the irrational.” The consciously marginal counter-discourse which Gorgona employed must be understood against the background of the relative involvement of its members in the art world on a personal basis as well as the specific situation of contemporary Yugoslavia (the Exat 51 group and New Tendencies movement), from which it set itself apart.

Július Koller’s 1965 *Antihappening* was a postcard-sized paper he sent to friends, colleagues and acquaintances in the post. This early piece expressed a critical reserve from direct activities

and created a critical distance from “actionism” as such before the first historical action was carried out in Slovakia. Printed on the postcard is “The System of subjective objectivity” in letters of diminishing size. If paraphrasing a happening is something like a Dadaist declaration,<sup>12</sup> “The system of subjective reality” is a concise appraisal of the artistic programme Koller worked on from 1965 till his death. Most of his actions up until the 1990s took place in publicly accessible urban spaces, in natural environments or, in part, at his own flat (Koller never had a studio). With a few exceptions (*Ping-Pong Club J.K. U.F.O.*, Bratislava, 1970), Koller did not envision the presence or participation of spectators, whether actively or at a distance. He used public spaces with an eye toward their “objective” functionality and developed his “cultural (futuristic, universal, physical, space-time, fantastic) operations (occupations, orientations, organisations, observations, proficiencies).” His activities resulted from a subjective adaptation to the emptying out of the public sphere—a sublimation of the real public which each artist feels the need to turn toward. The emptying out and normalisation of public spaces led in his case to a counter-action; thus, he subjectivised the space which belonged to all by means of operations, occupations, orientations, observations, and proficiencies. Within this framework, any spectators at his activities were a secondary public. This inaccessibility of his real public led to *Universal Orientation*—the vanishing point of his activities was not the real social sphere, but a subjective metaphysical space.

In their *Happsoc* declaration of 1965, Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčik, and Zita Kostrová declared all of Bratislava, along with all its inhabitants, buildings, balconies, dogs, etc., to be a work of art. They reportedly obtained a listing of statistics pertaining to the city upon request from the Statistical Office. The act of appropriation which declaring the city a work of art implied was a modified reaction to the strategy of the Nouveaux Réalistes, but within the socialist state’s ideological scheme it represented a subversion of the state’s administration of a space colonised by the colonial apparatus. The action mimicked the ideological operation of the coloniser; a group of artists were taking over the reality of the city (by means of official figures) in order to transform it into a reservoir of artistic production.

11 — Josip Vaništa, “The Draft of an Explanation,” 1961, M. Gattin (ed.), *Gorgona*, exh. cat., Muzej Suvremene umjetnosti, Zagreb, 2003, p. 10.

12 — Július Koller, *Retrospective Cultural Situation (U.F.O.)*, unpublished manuscript, 1994.



Josip Vaništa. *übermalung (over painting)*. 1959–65. Oil on gelatin silver print,  $7\frac{1}{8} \times 9\frac{3}{8}$ " (18.1 × 23.8 cm).  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased with funds provided by the Rendl Endowment for Slavic Art



Július Koller. *Universal Futurological Question Mark (U.F.O.) / Unnerzázny Futurologický Otažník (U.F.O.)*. 1978.  
Gelatin silver print, 19 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (49.8 × 49.8 cm). Courtesy Kontakt, The Art Collection of Erste Group  
and ERSTE Foundation

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In subsequent years, Filko expanded and implemented the same method of artistic appropriation to the country—Czechoslovakia—as a whole and eventually to the entire universe. We should not forget that not even outer space could wrench itself free from the control of the state apparatus; on the contrary, control over that space was one of the driving forces of the Cold War.

In Czechoslovakia during the late 1960s, censorship gradually weakened its grip, and the norms for controlling public spaces changed as well. The local political establishment progressively turned away and emancipated itself from the political and economic model represented by the colonial power using its own discourse (guided from above by communist reformers). This movement toward emancipation, known as the “third way” and represented by Alexander Dubček, did not last long. After the Warsaw Pact forces occupied Czechoslovakia in August 1968, the state apparatus instituted strict controls; the military colonisation was followed by a renewed self-colonisation (“normalisation”). Artists once again lost their short-lived ability to exhibit their work and make art for a real public. During the normalisation period (the 1970s and 1980s), Filko redirected his spatial expansions into the mental sphere.

This syncretistic subjective system is expressed in *Merzbau*, *Gesamtkunstwerk* (*The Merzbau*, *a Total Artwork*), which he brought to fruition on a private site in a small garden community on the outskirts of Bratislava. Filko systematically reinterpreted his own work in the 1980s and on the basis of this reinterpretation divided his *Merzbau* into twelve hierarchical spaces, reclassifying his entire oeuvre to date according to the colours of the chakras.

### Sites of Resistance in the 1970s and 1980s

The differentiation of local emancipatory and self-colonising conditions in each satellite state took on power and dynamism in the 1970s and 1980s. This may not have been evident at the time, but the artistic articulations of the new generation set themselves apart from long-held norms and polemics (which were, *a priori*, non-ideological) with the local state apparatuses. “Normalisation” in Czechoslovakia, “consumer communism” in Poland, and the relative cultural autonomy of Yugoslavia (as evidenced by the Student Cultural Centres in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana) produced new paradigms for relating to public norms and gallery spaces.

In Sanja Iveković’s *Triangle* (1979), during a ceremonial procession led by Marshal Tito

which went past her balcony, the artist drank whisky, read “Western literature,” and pretended to masturbate in full view of the police looking on from the surrounding rooftops. On her island of privacy, under the surveillance of the state apparatus at that moment, she was allegorically refusing to “adapt” her conduct. On her balcony, she proclaimed a subjective form of feminist anarchy which lasted until the arrival of the police at her flat. With her allegorical, compensatory orientation towards “Western goods,” Iveković was distancing herself from communist ideology, and with her anarchist script she was disaffirming local state control.

In *Streaking*, *Belgrade, Sremska Street, 12 May 1971* (1971) and *Zagreb, I Love You!* (1981), Tomislav Gotovac ran naked along one of Belgrade’s main thoroughfares. The “defenceless” artist was putting himself on display in a public space in his essential existential nakedness. Innocently, he ran, seemingly in a hurry to get somewhere, which dissuaded onlookers from stopping him. This action may be interpreted as an existential confrontation between the body and the control of the state and of civilization, an attempt at direct “communication” with the public. However, it was also a “grotesque incident”—for some unknown reason, he was not wearing anything. He had probably been divested of his clothes (was he bathing somewhere? caught in *flagrante* by someone’s husband?) and was running home to get some clothes on. In Gotovac’s action, the public sphere is articulated as a space of potentialities (the public sphere is not presented as such; it is that with which social activity fills it). Gotovac returns to art its ability to enter nonviolently into a dialogue with the norms of the public sphere.

In a series of photographs and actions (*Casa Nostra*, 1974; *Party 1*, 1978; *Party 2*, *Snagov*, 1971), Ion Grigorescu observes the normative activities which take place under intensive surveillance in a public space in Ceaușescu’s Romania. Grigorescu’s naked body becomes a projection surface onto which inner traumatic states to which the state apparatus exposes the individual’s life are displaced. As in the body-art actions of Petr Štembera and Zdeněk Mlčoch, Grigorescu’s activities are carried out in private spaces.

By contrast, Ewa Partum’s *Self-Identification* (1980) is—much in the line of Gotovac—an attempt at self-definition as a marking process in which the individual responds to the crisis of subjective identity by confirming it by means of other individuals.

The activities of Jiří Kovanda have a transient status; he explains the motives behind



Ewa Partum. *Self-Identification (Samoidentyfikacja)*. 1980. Photocollage, 19 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 27 $\frac{1}{5}$ " (50 × 70 cm).  
Courtesy the artist

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his actions as a primary need to articulate his own emotions and self-identification process in “fleeting contact” with people on the street. Kovanda’s actions are intentionally invisible; they use subtle changes in behaviour which are barely distinguishable from the everyday goings on in the streets and do not envisage the participation of passersby. They are intended for contemplation by a secondary gallery public (not only an Eastern but a universal artistic world).

One of the common threads connecting these artistic practices is their “non-studio”<sup>13</sup> character and a humility of expression which was to become an aesthetic hallmark of “Eastern art.” “My relation to plain things and simple people, to life and art, and to the modest financial situation in which I grew up encouraged my critical, anti-aesthetic attitude toward the essential meaning of art. I adopted the Dadaist creativity and its criticism of hypocrisy and conservative, petit-bourgeois tastes and incorporated it into my artistic ethical views. For this was in sharp contrast with the absurdity of the official culture and ideology of the time. I made the real world (with its urban, social, industrial

and sports phenomena) and the real world of art a ‘playground’ for playing with both actions and ideas.”<sup>14</sup>

Koller here expresses the “plainness” and simplicity of means he used throughout his oeuvre, which would become one of the pillars of symbolic resistance to official art. Official art, reflecting the rigidity and ahistoricity of the totalitarian ideology, never absorbed the counter-discourse, which thus remained apart, untouched in its “authenticity.” This schematic division should not be mythologised, however, as it does not comprehend a whole series of intermediate positions and hybrid states artists have taken up. Koller himself made a living as a drawing teacher for nonprofessional artists and painted inexpensive, decorative “postcard” cityscapes of Bratislava sold in bookshops and art shops; we could make a long list of other such hybrid states.

Excerpted from *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*. Edited by Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska. Translated by Ivan Gutierrez. Zurich: JRP|Ringier; Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2010.

13 — Daniel Buren, “Fonction de l’atelier,” 1971, *Écrits*, vol. 1 (Bordeaux: CAPC-Musée d’art contemporain, 1991), pp. 195–205.

14 — J. Koller, op. cit.

## Decolonizing Eastern Europe: Beyond Internal Critique

OVIDIU ȚICHINDELEANU

The social and cultural history of the “postcommunist transition” has been marked throughout the region by the return of two dominant phenomena of modernity: capitalism and coloniality. The fall of the Iron Curtain meant to a significant degree the reabsorption of the socialist bloc into larger and *longue-durée* structures of world history. In this sense, the “postcommunist transition” has been a process of structural and segmented integration of the former socialist bloc into Western or Western-led formations of political, economic, and military power such as the European Union, World Bank and IMF, and NATO. Accordingly, I proposed elsewhere conceiving the meaning of transition as the top-to-bottom alignment of East European governmentality into the order

of Western governmentality, of local economies into the world system of capitalism, and of local knowledges into the global geopolitics of knowledge, at the cost of the general population.<sup>1</sup>

If this is the case, then the possibilities of developing a critical theory of postcommunism depend logically on movements and critical reflections on capitalism and coloniality, coming from as different a body of critical theory as Marxian studies and decolonial thought. Marxism does not suffice to open an option, and neither does postcoloniality, but both are

1 — See also Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, “Towards a Critical Theory of Postcommunism?,” *Radical Philosophy* 159 (2010); and “Vampires in the Living Room: A View of What Happened to Eastern Europe after 1989, and Why Real Socialism Still Matters,” in Corinne Kumar, ed., *Asking We Walk: The South as New Political Imaginary*, vol. III, Bangalore: Streelekha, 2011.

relevant. However, the power of capital and the coloniality of power took on specific forms in Eastern Europe, given its recent history of seeking modernity differently, and such powers were countered during the transition by particular forms of local resistance. Moreover, without giving currency to the ubiquitous theme of the “stolen revolution” of 1989, one can argue that the process of transition itself instituted a radical change in the horizon of expectations, placing in a different frame the historical experience and aspirations of the popular movements that brought the revolutions of 1989.

One can thus identify a crucial and unique task for critical postcommunist thought and artistic practices: the continuous public creation of an epistemic space of resistance and alternatives to both capital and coloniality, articulated from the location of Eastern Europe, which could be based on or could fortify a form of regional internationalism and solidarity. In other words, I propose a sort of Pascalian wager on the historical experience of Eastern Europe, by way of a project that gives epistemic dignity to expressions of resistance and difference towards both capitalism and coloniality. The goal is moving towards a philosophy of transition, a border epistemology that embraces the specificity of Eastern Europe as a location of thought for critical visions, with the hope that such a space of criticality will avoid the pitfalls of both internal critiques of Western modernity and of externalist critiques of hegemony, imperialism, and domination. Here, the problem with internal critiques (in Western social theory) is not so much that they are not right, but of where they stand when they are right. To give an example, even in the case of a committed philosopher like Foucault, one can point to the lack of a theory of resistance complementing his great studies of power formations; one can also argue that Foucault’s model of the specific intellectual “recognizes structures but fails to confront them.”<sup>2</sup> An additional and very different precaution, related to the political potential of internal critiques, can be observed in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Romania, where prominent anticommunist dissidents renounced the pursuit of resistance after 1989, becoming supporters or direct partners of the new global, governmental and

capitalist powers. As for externalist or dominationalist critiques, which are particularly poignant in anti-imperialist and anticapitalist movements (often non-Western), my issue is with the recurrence of a certain failure to recognize the interconnectedness of struggles and oppressions, and the constant fallback to the nation-state as the fundamental framework of political agency. Therefore, the practical issue is not the “abandonment” of European critiques of Western modernity, and neither the legitimation of a general judgment that everything about Europe is bad, but the ethical concern for speaking truth to power, articulated by giving epistemic dignity to a major transformation and considering it in its own immanence or concrete historical forms.

[...]

In this sense I propose the elaboration of a critical theory of postcommunism at the intersection of decolonial thought and what I call epistemic materialism. The latter is based on the communicational memory encompassing the three periods of historical experience of actually existing socialism, the revolutions and fall of socialist regimes, and finally the postcommunist transition to capitalism. Together they constitute such a radical history of collective transformation and opening of differing paradigms, accompanied by such quick enclosures of possibilities, that in light of these major changes, the ongoing and slowly unfolding crisis of the world since 2008, together with the political rise of the Global South, could be seen as an immense and immediate site of opportunity. Instead of seeing in the newfound postcommunist situation of dependency a throwback to the 1970s, and thus yet another retrograde and predictable devolution of Eastern Europe, I propose considering the recent transformations as a movement that raises questions and brings to visibility crucial directions taken from the 1970s by global capitalism and global political powers, to the effect of limiting the direct dialogue and relations between socialist and decolonization movements.

However, defining the locality of one’s thinking is no easy task. After two decades of postcommunist transition, “Eastern Europe” is disappearing as a category of analysis, becoming simply “New Europe,” a “part of Europe,” or a “semi-periphery” of global capitalism. Brian Holmes recently deconstructed the binarity of Donald Rumsfeld’s famous distinction between “Old” and “New” Europe, bringing at the same time an update to Wallerstein’s

2 — See George Ciccariello-Maher, “European Intellectuals and Colonial Difference: Césaire and Fanon Beyond Sartre and Foucault,” in Jonathan Judaken, ed., *Race after Sartre: Antiracism, African Existentialism, Postcolonialism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.

categories of the world-system (core, semi-periphery, periphery). Holmes proposed conceiving the process of expansion of the EU as a new hierarchical distribution of citizens between Core Europe (Germany, France, etc.), New Europe (Poland, Czech Republic, etc.), and Edge Europe (Moldova, Ukraine, Turkey, etc.).<sup>3</sup> In this sense, one can argue that an integral part in the constitution of the new European identity was also assumed by Libya, whose new-found postcommunist identity can be glimpsed from Colonel Gaddafi's reported words from Rome, on August 30, 2010, about Libya's role as a "defense for an advanced and united Europe," a bloc against the "barbaric invasion of starving and ignorant Africans."<sup>4</sup>

In direct relation to the disappearance of Eastern Europe as a reference and its absorption into the European Union, the official disappearance of borders, as part of the process of EU integration, has also meant the unprecedented rise of an international web of European policing, a gigantic industry of confinement and control whose size is visible even in the imposing headquarters of Frontex, the European Union agency for exterior border security, situated not accidentally in Warsaw, Poland. One can further refine the sense of East European locality by referring, as Marina Gržinić proposed, to the "former Eastern Europe," namely a region subjected to a process of reduction of identity or epistemic relevance, transformed into a borderland of Europe, or more generally a borderland of "the Western world,"<sup>5</sup> both in the sense of a buffer zone to non-European territories and as a territory defined by the condition of border-crossing and checkpoints. In this sense, as Eastern Europe is fragmented and disappears, the differences between New Europe and Edge Europe are overdetermined by Core Europe.

### At the Frontier of Change

In the process of European integration, what actually disappeared is the articulation of knowledge from a position of non-ethnocentric locality or epistemic autonomy. During the Cold War, the differences between Western and Eastern Europe referred to two radically

different epistemic spaces, relatively autonomous in their own right, which could not be reduced to differences between nation-states. As opposed to that situation, the European integration coincides with the reduction of differences to a mode of colonial difference, which draws distinctions between what is modern and what is non-modern, resting on the overarching image of thought of Western universality.

Simpler put, in the workings of the post-communist transition, the European identity of East Europeans is lesser than the European identity of West Europeans. Against this racial prejudice, by articulating knowledge from the location of the European borderland, Eastern Europe can also be understood as a crucial space of transformations of the meaning of European identity itself. Thus, contrary to the fears of ethno-nationalists, who came to the fore throughout the region immediately after 1989, the process of integrating states from Poland to Bulgaria into the European Union did not shatter the nationalist identity and national symbols of these countries, but the *regional* sense of the former socialist bloc. After the integration into the EU, racist ethnocentrism has been on the rise throughout Eastern Europe, but instead of being directed against neighbors of different ethnicity, as was the case in the 1990s (Romanians vs. Hungarians, Serbs vs. Croats, core nationals against the Roma people, etc.), it currently tends to be expressed in forms reproducing Western racism and the global, eurocentric idea of race,<sup>6</sup> namely in expressions of radical disaffection towards African, Asian, and Arab peoples and individuals. Such gestures range from intellectual dismissals of multiculturalism and political correctness in favor of "objective European values," to blatant offense and abuse. The negative disposition against the global "non-Europeans" is accompanied in the public sphere by racist resentment (and policies) against the local Roma people, who are subject to systematic portrayal, in the postcommunist culture industries, as the local model of "non-Europeans."<sup>7</sup> These model

3 — Brian Holmes, "Invisible States: Europe in the Age of Capital Failure," in Simon Sheikh, ed., *Capital (It Fails Us Now)*, b\_books/NIFCA, 2006.

4 — Hama Tuma, "Of Gaddafi and Arab Racism Towards Blacks," *The Other Afrik*, Friday 3 September 2010.

5 — Marina Gržinić, Communication in the workshop *Critical and Decolonial Dialogues across South-North and East-West*, Middelburg, The Netherlands, 7–9 July 2010.

6 — For the idea of race, see Aníbal Quijano, "Colonialidad del Poder, Eurocentrismo y América Latina," in Edgardo Lander, ed., *Colonialidad del Saber, Eurocentrismo y Ciencias Sociales*, Buenos Aires: CLASCO-UNESCO, 2003. Translation in English by Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (2000), Duke University Press, pp. 533–556.

7 — For more details, see the series of articles in the Romanian online journal *Criticatrac*: Cristina Rat, "Locuințe anti-sociale à la Cluj. Nu se știe cină dacă cine primește," *Criticatrac* 25 (March 2011); Iulia Hașdeu, "Sexism, rasism, naționalism – privire dinspre antropologia feministă," *Criticatrac* 24 (February 2011).

dialectical images are integral dimensions of *postcommunist racism*, that is, of a specific positioning of the emergent East European middle class within the global matrix of the coloniality of power, which then, given the middle-class domination over the local public sphere, tends to be reverberated in the wider societal strata. Fundamental to this local construction of white identity is the idea of *passing*, the assumption that East Europeans can “become European” or are “essentially European” because they can pass in the Western world as White—as opposed to Roma, Black people, or Arab people. For East Europeans then, racial passing overdetermines *integration* (which I consider the operative concept of transition), which means both that local whiteness is continuously subjected to tests of passing, and that the postcommunist subjective identities are open to experiments of racial passing. Postcommunist racism is on the dark side of such transformations. Its entitlement and constructions of self-image and racial Others provide a particular sense of the world for East Europeans after the fall of the Iron Curtain, defined by the idea of social domination at a global scale, where the process of “becoming European” through “integration” and the mimicry of Whiteness constitute the royal road of subjectivity.

[...]

In relation to capitalism, East European governments have engaged after 1989 in a “catch-up” game with the developed market economies. Capitalist power did not emerge in the postcommunist transition only as a negative force of violence and repression, but also through spectacle, seduction, and the productive colonization of the spheres of social life and inner lifeworlds. In the process, Eastern Europe emerged during the two decades after 1989 as a new laboratory of neoliberal experiments, which included shock therapy, radical austerity, forced de-industrialization, privatization of commons, flat tax, wage cuts, flexible employment, and forced vacations. Through the reforms of the EuroPact and the Stability and Growth Pact, some of these ideas are poised to redefine the meaning of the whole European Union in the summer of 2011.<sup>8</sup> The exceptional austerity measures against the “temporary crisis” of global capitalism could be transformed thus into a permanent basis of economic governance in the EU, and in the process, more

European citizens will be accommodated to precarious conditions hitherto reserved to the immigrant worker and the borderland European. Such a chain of events would confirm David Harvey’s recent thesis on the flow of capital, according to which capitalism never really resolves its major crises, providing instead new roles within the system to the determinants of the crises,<sup>9</sup> while also restating the role of colonial difference as a pillar of historical capitalism. As Salma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa had shown already in 1972, the politics of austerity are based on pushing the exploitation of unpaid or underpaid labor, whether that of women or immigrant workers or workers beyond the borders of colonial difference. And indeed, capitalism does not reduce all forms of labor to the wage-capital relationship, but, on the contrary, is a form of global power that works by integrating completely different forms of labor, fragmented by imperial, colonial, and gender differences. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos put it, a society is not capitalist because all the social and economic relations are capitalist, but because the capitalist relations are determining how the economic and social relations existing in society work.

In this sense, it should be understandable if East Europeans profess a sense of *déjà vu* upon hearing pleas for “austerity” and “a return to normal” coming from world leaders,<sup>10</sup> as this is all they heard during the postcommunist transition, and even in the decade before the Revolutions of 1989. In fact, with the global crisis of capitalism which exploded in 2008, Eastern Europe is confronted with the third depression in three decades, with barely any period of recovery, after the socialist slump of the 1980s and the destructive market-reform years of the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in an ironic twist of the narrative of transition, it would seem that instead of Easterners catching up with the West, precariousness has caught up with the Western world. Considering such collective transformations of Europe during the postcommunist

9 — David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, London: Profile Books, 2010.

10 — Brian Holmes, “Fault Lines & Subduction Zones: The Slow-Motion Crisis of Global Capital,” *Occupy Everything*, 28 July 2010.

11 — In Romania, according to the very conservative measurements of the World Bank, during the austerity poverty rose from an estimated 6% of the population in 1987–1988 to 39% in 1993–1995. Victor Axenciuc, *Introducere în istoria economică a României. Epoca modernă și contemporană*, Bucharest, Editura Fundația România de Măine, 2000. See also World Bank reports on Romania from 1995–1996 retrieved from <http://www-wds.worldbank.org>.

8 — See “Business Against Europe,” Corporate Europe Observatory, 23 March 2011.

transition, as seen from the borderlands of Eastern Europe, it appears that the struggle against capitalism cannot be separated from resistances against the coloniality of power.

### The Historical Experience of Communism

Eastern Europe is an epistemic borderland between communism and capitalism, and it was defined as such also prior to 1989, when the state-socialist regimes devised their policies and five-year plans in order to complete the transition from capitalism to socialism. In fact, insofar as official ideology goes, no Eastern European socialist regime ever reached the level of Chapter 40 of the Polecon, the Soviet textbook of political economy, namely the transition from socialism to communism.

However, after 1989, the fall of the socialist bloc was widely interpreted from Western standpoints as a proof of the “death of communism” and definitive confirmation that there is only one option for development: the 1990s were, more so than Thatcher’s and Reagan’s 1980s, the great years of TINA, There Is No Alternative. It would be hard to find another moment in history when capitalism was identified with democracy to such an extent.

For leftist thinkers, the only way to keep alive other options, including the “hypothesis of communism,” was to state that whatever happened in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was not communism, and neither socialism. The predominant views brought up to date C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya’s analysis of the Soviet Union as a form of state capitalism which abandoned the workers’ councils. Different forms of the same argument stressed that, since the workers’ councils lost control already from 1923, whatever followed in the Soviet Union and the socialist regimes was basically irrelevant for a positive renewal of leftist theory. However, a side effect of this direction of criticism, developed in different directions by theoreticians such as Perry Anderson and Alex Callinicos, was to accept the idea of *failure* as a framework and thus to abandon in the final instance Eastern Europe as a valid category of positive analysis.

Furthermore, through the incessant efforts of attaching an appropriate name for the recent history of Eastern Europe (state capitalist regimes, Stalinist socialism, national communism, centrally planned economy, or even centrally managed consumerism, etc.), the focus was moved away from the people, and towards a debate focused on superstructures and arts of

governing. After the fall of socialist regimes and the conservative aftermath of the Revolutions of 1989, the irrelevance of the experience of Eastern Europe for Marxist, post-Marxist, or other forms of critical social theory, in any positive sense, tended to be generally accepted. Even the concept of class, which ceased a long while ago to be the master concept of Marxism (in the 1950s–1960s), retained great importance in theory and social movements alike; comparatively, the unique experience of Eastern Europe ceased to be a reference at all (except as a negative illustration). Whereas the *concept* of class was de-essentialized but kept an important role in connective frameworks such as the analysis of intersectorial oppressions, the *location* of experience was simply demoted of epistemic dignity and abandoned. Could it be that this happened because the locus of enunciation of most critical social theory is still subject to a logic of *discovery* rather than *connection* in the colonial matrix of power? Meanwhile, in Romania and other parts of the former socialist bloc, anticommunism emerged as a dominant and institutionalized cultural ideology of transition. The postcommunist form of anticommunism was generally pronounced from the right of the political spectrum, ignored “leftist” and social theories and ideology critiques, and focused mostly on superstructures and arts of governing. Thus, the meaning of “ideology” tended to be reduced to the ideology of the Communist Party (implying that the age of ideologies has ended in the present), and even oral histories tended to be reduced to histories of government abuse and representations of totalitarianism. In this sense, one can argue that the established anticommunism failed as a project of social justice: by defining history through the experience of trauma, and by accepting that the lives of people were simply “lost” or “sacrificed,” what was actually lost and sacrificed was the epistemic relevance and dignity of these lives. Anticommunism emerged thus in the cultural history of transition as the main cultural ideology that tried to radically change epistemic references, by reducing the past to a homogeneous totality identified as a bad deviation from the “normal” eurocentric course of history. Through the cultural practices of its supporters, anticommunism also assumed a sort of proto-political role in the postcommunist public sphere, working as a principle for the selection of new cultural elites and thus as a condition of visibility. Anticommunism was also the main orientation justifying the introduction of a new



official history, sanctioned by state institutions such as the presidency. Finally, one can understand anticommunism as the local instantiation of and reconnection to the coloniality of power, insofar as it proposed considering communism as an essentially premodern past;<sup>12</sup> it introduced the idea of a lesser humanity of the “communist man”; instituted tribunal-thought (as in “the condemnation of communism” and “lustration” projects) as the undisputed way of considering the historical experience of Eastern Europe; and opened the way for the other two dominant cultural ideologies of transition, Eurocentrism and capitalocentrism.

What both Western critics and Eastern anti-communists either ignored or reduced to a secondary role was the actual historical experience of the peoples of Eastern Europe. Both gestures, from left and right, reproduced thus a central tenet of coloniality: the historical experience of people is irrelevant. The actual lives of people have been generally subsumed to negative frameworks of analysis (such as “totalitarianism”), undermining the epistemic relevance of practices and knowledges that emerged in their own right behind the Iron Curtain as well as during the postcommunist transition.

The historical experience of real socialism, then, and not simply Marxism, should be the point of departure for the development of an *epistemic materialism*. In fact, this is a way of answering Marx’s early question: “Will the theoretical needs be immediate practical needs? It is not enough for thought to strive for realization, reality itself must strive towards thought.”<sup>13</sup> The Revolutions of 1989 turned conservative, and the term “revolution” itself may be contested, but in reality the main forces of revolutionary pressure have been without doubt the workers from industrialized cities. Outside the worker movements it is hard to find “organized resistance,” but oral histories abound in recollections of people who were not resigned to the status quo or intimidated by the powers, and of real acts of “resistance without infrastructure,” which cannot be simply reduced retrospectively to forms of anticommunism or anti-totalitarianism. The regime may have acted like the owner of production units and labor force, but people developed independently a plethora of non-capitalist

forms of economic activity: informal markets (bazaar, video market, solidarity economies, etc.), sustainable food and living systems (family and group gardens), friendship economies, long-term investments (house building and reparation, etc.), long-term savings, workplace exchange, barter economies of services, collectible values, gift economies, “gypsy banks,” and so on. The immanent field of such alternative economies cannot be reduced to an “undeveloped” form of market economy or capitalism, since they reverse the basic order of institutions in capitalism, subordinating economy to social life. Similarly, the regime may have reproduced patriarchy, the bourgeois idea of nuclear family through mass urbanization and absurd reproduction policies, but life in real socialism abounded in non-bourgeois and non-nuclear forms of socialization and cultural exchange, of women’s networks and solidarity collectives that cannot be reduced to the state/civil society dichotomy. These are just a few examples of concrete forms of the historical experience of real socialism that have been subject to intense pressures by the new formations of postcommunist power, being either colonized and/or commodified (what postcommunist anticommunism was for resistance, pawnshops and micro-credit banks were for friendship economies, etc.), or reduced to forms of nonexistence in the postcommunist transition and annihilated as social practices and bases of cultural memory.

Considering the epistemic dignity of such concrete forms of reality as they strive for thought—for open expression—in a process of radical transformation is the first step towards a positive epistemic evaluation of real socialism. At its turn, the latter is vital for achieving a sense of social justice and a healing reconciliation with the past that includes all its traumas, and which could offer collective self-confidence and a vision for future transformations. This is the first condition for a local movement beyond internal or reactive critique.

The further development of epistemic materialism is important in a wider sense for the renewal of critical thought, since an actual transition beyond capitalism and coloniality can only start from alternative concrete historical experiences, only by considering the real lives and stories of people as a relevant epistemic site, worthy of another modernity, whose positive sense emerges only in their interconnectedness. Resistance only stems from the past, and more precisely from the cultural memory of radically different historical experiences, and

12 — See *Red Tours* (2010), film by Joanne Richardson and David Rych.

13 — See Karl Marx, “Introduction,” *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843).

real socialism provides an abundance of such instances, which could only gain from being placed in relation with other global experiences of resistance. This would be the condition for gaining an internationalist and non-ethnocentric sense of Eastern Europe as a region, beyond paradigms of dependency.

The establishment of anticommunism and the dominant cultural ideologies of transition gravitated in the direction of capturing, museifying, or destroying the cultural memory of real socialism, leaving people with no other cultural life than the one offered through television, the workplace, and the new culture industry. The postcommunist colonization and capitalization changed minds and bodies, alienated

existential territories, and shattered the staying power of local epistemologies.

However, there is also a resistant side of transition. By acquiring a sense of the evolution of concrete forms of resistance and alternative historical experiences, from real socialism to the postcommunist transition, one can start glimpsing the real possibilities of decolonizing Eastern Europe. And thus, as one can already get from this brief coup d'oeil, in spite of the forlorn affection of recent great transformations, what emerges is a generous field for research, experimentation, and creative change, which opens firstly to perhaps the last remaining generalist disciplines: philosophy and contemporary art.

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## Back from the Future

BORIS GROYS

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Anyone wishing to write about present-day Eastern European art really has no choice but once again to take sides on the inevitable question: can this art be said to possess a distinctive character, and if so, what precisely constitutes its particularity? In other words, whether and in what manner contemporary Eastern European art differs from its Western counterpart. Thus, I would like to start my essay by clearly stating that I do believe one may, and indeed should, speak of the particular nature of Eastern European art, whereby this distinction issues solely from the fact that it comes from Eastern Europe. Although this claim might at first seem somewhat tautological, it is actually not.

Contemporary art is to the utmost degree contextual. The times have passed when we were once able to identify and clearly distinguish national schools of art or international movements according to precisely definable and immediately recognisable formal characteristics. Today, artists from all over the world employ the same forms and procedures, but they use them in varying cultural and political contexts. Subsequently, our knowledge about these contexts is not an external feature of these works of art; instead, from the outset an artist can and must expect the viewer to regard

the context in which he produces his art as an intrinsic dimension of his work. Works of art no longer simply speak for themselves: they also allude to the context in which they were made and are perceived immediately as signs, symptoms or information that instruct the viewer about the specific conditions prevailing in that part of the globe from where these works come. The same, incidentally, is also true for Western art: if the whole world were not so interested in what is going on right now in New York or Los Angeles, and if contemporary American art did not act as a source of information about the current state of affairs in American society, then this art would lose much of its attraction. Likewise, Eastern European art is seen inevitably as Eastern European, treated as a well of information on the state of affairs in those societies from which it has emerged, and not purely as the work of individual artists who conceivably might not even wish to be associated with these societies. Interestingly, such a sociological and ethnographic perspective on Eastern European art is by no means exclusive to art commentary in the West. Even Eastern European art critics, along with the artists themselves, explore the art of their respective countries for symptoms that will help them diagnose the prevailing conditions in those countries.

So, under these circumstances one question in particular is raised: how is the respective art context—in this case, the Eastern European context—assessed on an international level, and how is the art produced within this context positioned by those observing it? Generally speaking, the present state of Eastern Europe is viewed as one of gradual approximation to the West following a long historical period of separation and alternative social development. Likewise, present-day art in Eastern Europe, which now quite manifestly employs the same language and the same procedures as Western art, is construed as one of the many tokens of such a “*rapprochement*,” albeit with extremely mixed feelings. From a political and, so to speak, humanitarian viewpoint, this process of assimilation is of course greeted as a welcome development—after all, how could any well-meaning person not wish improved economic and social conditions on all people everywhere? Yet from a different, aesthetic viewpoint, and one which is far more relevant to art itself, this convergence has prompted a surge of dismay—one would prefer neither to see it nor to hear about it. This is because today’s globalised art thrives on differences: the art world is constantly in search of the *Other*, of what is distinctive or alternative. But with the demise of European communism we have also lost the most significant alternative to Western uniformity in recent history, one that was not merely formulated but also brought about. Its disappearance has made the world a poorer place in terms of differences and alternatives, and Eastern European art is currently held up as confirmation of this loss. Thus, as a social symptom, this art is seen as part of the overall syndrome affecting post-communist Eastern Europe: as a feature of the region’s inundation by Western commercial interests and consumerist mass culture.

Furthermore, this symptom seems to have only secondary status. Art critics in Eastern Europe frequently deplore the dependence of Eastern European art upon the Western art market, Western art institutions and Western art criticism. Such dependency unquestionably exists, but its root cause lies primarily in the relatively weak social position enjoyed by current contemporary art in Eastern European countries—even if this varies from one country to another. The reason for its low standing is, incidentally, not related to the economic weakness of Eastern Europe—after all, art there could certainly survive financially if it were properly appreciated. Rather, the general public and art audiences in these countries are far more

interested in commercialised art from the West than in their own elitist contemporary art. As a result, this art remains ensconced in a minority enclave, making it doubly dependent upon international acknowledgement by art institutions that are dominated by the West. In turn, gaining such recognition essentially hinges on the degree to which Eastern European art manages to thematise the specificity of its own context and to allay the impression that blindly accepts, let alone happily connives in, the erasure of any distinctions between East and West. This raises the question of the artistic means that might be used to thematise the special nature of the post-communist art context, for it is surely quite evident to all concerned that the true specificity of Eastern Europe can only reside in its communist past. However, any attempt to offer a more precise definition of this specificity is immediately hampered by considerable theoretical difficulties.

There is a limited range of options currently available to us in our repertoire of theoretical discourses for speaking about the past. First and foremost at our disposal is the language of trauma. Nowadays, the manifestation of the past in the present is most frequently explained and interpreted in terms of trauma. Accordingly, the specificity of *la condition post-communiste* would be represented as a result of the very particular traumatising suffered by the peoples of Eastern Europe—which they should now be dealing with in this way or that. This is by and large the most common form of explanation, and by the same token also the least interesting. We now live in a world in which everyone seems to be traumatised by one thing or another; indeed, each one of us has some kind of past to show for, whereby, as already mentioned, the past as such has now become inconceivable as being anything other than traumatic. However different the causes for these traumata might be, what they all basically have in common is the figure of traumatising itself; ultimately, the various forms of traumatising all begin to look remarkably similar. For this reason, the figure of the trauma is poorly suited as a means of characterising the special nature of the post-communist social condition: it is quite simply far too general. One should instead be asking precisely what kind of past the communist past represents and what distinguishes this past from other pasts.

As soon as this question is voiced, one is immediately confronted with the present-day discourse of cultural studies, a discipline that is preoccupied primarily with the issue of cultural

differences, insofar as these are still detectable as traces of distinct patterns of traditional conditioning within the current globalised cultural arena. Conspicuously, however, in the context of cultural studies, where attention is directed primarily at the postcolonial world, the entire post-communist realm features as nothing more than a vast and unmitigated blind spot. This brings one to wonder whether the discourse of cultural identity as formulated in the context of postcolonial studies might not equally be applied to the cultural radius of the post-communist world.

Yet an application of this kind strikes me as impossible—and I will now attempt to describe the reason why. The prevailing discourse concerning cultural identity defines the human subject in transit from a premodern, contained, and isolated community towards a modern, open, globalised, and networked society. This human being is supposed to adapt to the forces of modernity, which are presumed to be motors of homogenisation and uniformity. As a result, the human subject surrenders much of its premodern cultural tradition. In former times this loss was welcomed by the prevailing theory of progress, a response based on the credo that ancient traditions were vehicles for nothing more than myth and prejudice, and so, as barriers to progress, clearly deserved to be eliminated—even with force, if so required. By contrast, the current vogue of thinking in cultural studies regards these premodern traditions as generators of resistance against the totalitarian and levelling effect of modernity, which furthermore reacts with intolerance and oppression towards those cultures it deems “underdeveloped.” What previously might have been diagnosed as underdevelopment would nowadays be hailed as cultural heterogeneity successfully at odds with and immune to the cultural imperialism of homogenising, progressive Western thinking. Rallying to the defense of heterogeneity and the dignity of cultural otherness can, of course, only be applauded—nonetheless, this approach is not applicable to the situation in post-communist Eastern Europe. Which is why all attempts to speak of post-communist cultural identity in the same register as postcolonial identity sound so implausible.

Communist-ruled societies might by all means have been hermetically closed societies, but they were also utterly modern, asserting the credo of progress even more aggressively and combating the residue of premodern cultural identity with far greater vehemence

than did liberal democracies in the West. Consequently, communist society offers an outstanding example of modernity that, rather than opening out, led towards enclosure and isolation; furthermore, it represents a prototype of modernity that is simply ignored by the predominant ideology of our time. Indeed, by insisting that the path of modernisation is also synonymous with a process of opening, and treating all forms of closed society simply as premodern, this ideology ignores that communism was formulating its own agenda for globalisation, for which reason alone it should instead be ascribed to modernity. The cultural differences distinguishing the post-communist cultural sphere from the rest of the world therefore have thoroughly modern origins, as opposed to those differences with premodern roots commonly thematised by the school of cultural studies. As it happens, communism hardly represents a great exception in modern history; after all, modernity has persistently spawned its own apocalyptic sects, radical parties or avant-garde art movements that isolated or insulated themselves against their respective contemporary societies—although this was never done in the name of a particular past, but under the banner of some universal future. Once they have dispersed, what such modern, yet closed, communities leave behind them is not the past but the future. This means that although the post-communist subject takes the same route from enclosure to openness as its postcolonial counterpart, it moves along this path in quite the opposite direction—against the flow of time. While the postcolonial subject proceeds from the past into the present, the post-communist enters the present from the future. Certainly, moving against the flow of time has always been a tricky business; many an apocalyptic sect or avant-garde art movement has foundered on this task. The only thing that can be said to distinguish post-communist culture from these groups is its sheer size. Ultimately, communism is nothing more than the most extreme and radical manifestation of militant modernism, of the belief in progress and of the dream of an enlightened avant-garde acting in total unison, of utter commitment to the future. But it is precisely this dimension of communism, as indeed of all other projects that have pursued radical modernisation, that is currently being repressed from public consciousness, for at present modernity clamours to be seen as being an unreservedly liberal, tolerant, and open-minded champion of human rights.

Where Eastern Europe is concerned, the denial of this aspect of communism goes hand in hand with an agenda of re-exoticising, re-Orientalising, and re-antiquitising former communist countries. Where communism once used to reign we must now have the Orient. The redefinition of Eastern Europe by the media is currently being performed as a purported “rediscovery” of its varied archaic, premodern, and ethnically shaped cultural identities, which are alleged to have remained the same as they always were. Yet what is quickly forgotten about communism is that under its rule, the campaign to combat and eradicate regional and ethnic cultural identities in Eastern Europe was waged with far greater vehemence and thoroughness than in the West. And whatever national traditions still managed to survive were later tailored to the needs of prevailing ideology, reinterpreted and harnessed to the respective propaganda purposes of the time. Although national revivalism was invoked among dissident circles in various countries (even during the communist era) as part of the opposition strategy against communist internationalism, this amounted to little more than a gesture within a political field that bore no real allegiance to the continuity of national traditions; in fact, such traditions served merely as ideological simulacra within this altogether ideologised context. So when today’s media, for example, show Russian *babushkas* (old women) weeping in churches to illustrate the image of an eternal Russia, they omit to mention that in the 1920s and 1930s, the mothers and fathers of these very *babushkas* had gone out plundering and torching the same churches—and for exactly the same reasons as today’s *babushkas* file out to pray in the now newly reopened churches: political opportunism. After all, the proverbial *babushkas* choose to watch precisely those TV programmes that tell them how an up-to-date Russian *babushka* should behave in the context of contemporary politics.

Accordingly, the symbolic re-Orientalising of post-communist Eastern Europe, currently being cast in all international media as the rediscovery of its purported premodern and pre-communist identity, has above all one purpose: to inscribe the process of the simultaneous Westernisation of Eastern European countries into the currently dominant discursive framework. Had post-communist countries—then and now—always been Oriental, then this process of Westernisation could reasonably be described in the usual categories of modernisation, namely as the opening up

of premodern, closed communities and as a transition from isolation to globalisation. But what is mostly ignored is that all these countries—and not just Russia—possess their own avant-garde traditions that are marked by uninterrupted continuity both in the official culture of the communist era as well as in dissident circles. The other fact that is overlooked is that these countries were all once fully integrated within a shared internationalist and globalist venture—the project of communism. Thus the real transition now being undergone by post-communist Eastern Europe, namely the passage from a militant form of modernity towards modernity in a moderate guise, is being symbolically displaced by an alleged transition from an Oriental, premodern condition into Western modernity. By being unwittingly inscribed into an Oriental context in this manner, the militant strategies of Eastern European modernity (which certainly also have their advocates in the West—communist ideology was, after all, a Western invention) are being portrayed as phenomena that are alien and foreign to Western modernity.

Yet significantly, in an endeavour to be radical, it is artistic modernism that has constantly shunned openness and instead preferred to operate with self-withdrawal, choosing to retreat from public communication and assume the programmatic posture of being misunderstood. So any attempt to explain artistic disparities with reference to premodern differences such as ethnicity disregards precisely the crucial promise of an innovative, future-oriented difference that is no longer rooted in the past, an opportunity that constitutes the very fascination of both modern art and modernity itself. For modern art proceeds within a now familiar paradox: the more modern, forward-looking, and universal this art strives to be, the more exclusive its language becomes, the more esoteric is its effect on the viewer, and the more it recoils from being directly understood by its audience. But this should be viewed neither as a failure of the original universalist project nor as the inevitable re-emergence of differences it had been attempting to suppress. On the contrary, it is evidence of the universalist project keenly following its own intrinsic logic. For every universalist project deliberately drives a sharp divide between those who adhere to it and those who prefer not to. The greater the universalist aspirations of a project, the deeper this division becomes and the more difficult it is to profess allegiance to it. Thus the art of the classical avant-garde made a conscious effort



Ilya Kabakov. *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*. 1985/2014. Mixed media.  
 Installation view from the exhibition *Utopia and Reality? El Lissitzky, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov*,  
 Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow, 2014. Courtesy Ilya and Emilia Kabakov

to avoid being immediately understood by its audience, precisely because it strove to be radically open and universal; it chose to address a new breed of universal humanity rather than the fractured and veritably pluralist public of its time. With this approach the avant-garde managed to split society, causing a rupture that defies explanation by reference to any previously existing cultural differences. It is the invention of this wholly new, artificial difference that represents the true work of art created by the avant-garde.

For language, including visual language, can be deployed not only as a means of communication, but also as an instrument for strategically planned discommunication or even self-induced excommunication, in other words, for deliberately abstaining from the communicating community. The purpose of this is to wield power over social differences, to evolve a strategy for generating new differences rather than overcoming or communicating the old ones. In the same way, a characteristic feature of modernist political movements has been precisely their repeated attempts to launch new avant-garde political parties or to formulate constantly new visions of the future that anyone could support if they so wished, thereby introducing new differences into society oriented towards the future rather than based on the past. Communism was just a further endeavour of this kind, not dissimilar to other strategies pursued by avant-garde art. Seen from this perspective, one might now identify one attribute of Eastern European art in particular that does indeed distinguish it from contemporary Western art, namely its collective or group-based character.

At present, the Western art market perceives the artist only as a lone figure who operates in this market under his own name as a free entrepreneur. The days of avant-garde groups and movements have long since passed. The formation of artists' groups in the West has become a difficult business—and those that do still establish themselves tend to cling nostalgically to the image of early avant-garde or socialist traditions. But anyone who is familiar with the various art scenes throughout Eastern Europe will know that artists' groups there do not represent an exception, but the general rule. On the whole these groups consistently manifest themselves as such: witness, for example, "Collective Actions" and "Medical Hermeneutics" in Russia, or "Irwin" in Slovenia. Quite often artists will work in tandem, like Savadov and Senchenko from the Ukraine. But there are also many

instances where individual groups bear no official name and do not even exhibit or operate publicly under one, yet nonetheless still work as groups. The figure of this type of group formation, incidentally, is extensively reflected in the work of Ilya Kabakov; although he himself does operate individually, he ascribes his work to different imaginary authors and in this way acts in the name of a virtual group of artists. In Eastern Europe, artistic projects are thus still viewed as potentially collective operations that other artists are also welcome to join—as a means of distinguishing themselves from those who withhold their support. This marks a clear distinction vis-à-vis Western notions of an individual artistic project that, in spite of being communicated in a public forum, nonetheless lacks any desire to recruit further members or to establish a collective. That this amounts to a crucial factor distinguishing East from West is confirmed by the persistent inability on the part of Western art institutions to document such group-based artistic activities. Needless to say, these institutions are quite familiar with individual artists who represent collective cultural identities within a contemporary art context but, significantly, only that kind of identity which is premodern or socially repressed. On the other hand, what they are unfamiliar with is the fact that contemporary art might be presented in the form of a shared collective activity. This is why when artists from Eastern Europe and their works are exhibited in the West they are mostly shown individually and in isolation, extracted from their actual group habitat and transferred into a context frequently defined by highly dubious premises.

But it would be neither wise nor fair to demand of Western art institutions that they perform a task which instead is actually the duty of Eastern European artists, curators, and art critics: to reflect on the specific context of contemporary art in Eastern Europe through its own art. Those who refuse to contextualise themselves will be implanted into a context by someone else and then run the risk of no longer recognising themselves. Nonetheless, Eastern European art has of course to some degree always performed this work of self-contextualisation and has been doing so for many years. But such a process will take a long time and is inevitably painstakingly slow.

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Translated by Matthew Partridge.



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# Will the East's Past Be the West's Future?

RASTKO MOČNIK

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"The East is a career": it is with this quote from Disraeli that Edward Saïd opens his book *Orientalism*. As a *personage régnante* of his time, Queen Victoria's prime minister was concerned about the futures of Western individuals. After the breakdown of neo-liberal capitalism and the massive reappearance of the state upon the economic horizon, we should perhaps reconsider whether the idea that the past of the East may be the collective future of the West might be more than a coquettish philosophical paradox after all.

The East, as a notion that covers a weakly defined area spreading from Central Europe towards Central Asia, has roughly been understood in two main ways. The first understanding belongs to "the fall of communism" paradigm. It explains the present with a certain idea of the past—an idea that curiously de-historicises the past to which it itself belongs. It ascribes the "fall of communism" to immanent features of historical socialist systems—and not to political and social struggles within socialist systems themselves. It tells us that the Berlin Wall "fell"—and wants us to forget that the people of Berlin tore it down. Using the explanatory inventory of the Cold War, this understanding now turns it against the labour movements, critical intellectual efforts and popular mobilisations that formerly enjoyed a certain sympathy with anti-communist ideologists. The debates at the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 showed the selective nature of the present anti-communist explanatory grid: workers' councils established during the Hungarian revolution of '56 do not fit into its scheme. This view cannot accommodate the fact that freedom of expression was won in large parts of Socialist Federal Yugoslavia during the mid-eighties, as a result of the federation-wide mobilisation to oppose the last mounted trial against six Belgrade intellectuals who organised a "free university." Rather than having an explanatory value, this notion of the East performs a historical amnesia—it erases the political dimension from the Eastern past, and achieves equivalent effects in the present.

The other way to understand the notion of the East would be to explain the past with the knowledge of the present. One of the prominent contemporary processes is the destruction

of the social state. Quite revealingly, the construction of the social state after World War II is a feature that is common both to the East and to the standpoint *from where* it appears as the East, i.e., to Western Europe and North America. The destruction of the social state started in the West during the eighties, then proceeded to the East in the nineties. Within such an integrated historical account, we would understand historical socialisms as variants of the social state upon the periphery of the capitalist world system. The Western social state in the developed centre of the capitalist system was an achievement of the working classes' struggles within the frame of the post-revolutionary state, first established by the French revolution, and politically constituted upon the "sovereignty of the people." On the underdeveloped periphery, the social state had also been historically made possible by a revolution, the October revolution; it likewise developed within a *politicised* frame, this time based upon the "dictatorship of the proletariat." In both the central and the peripheral variants, the institutional political frame has been usurped by the party-state administrative and political groups that claimed to *represent* the "people" and the "proletariat" respectively. They were soon criticised by the people they claimed to represent: as "partitocracy" (the rule of a closed pool of parties) in the West, as "bureaucracy" (the autocracy of one party) in the East. In neither case has the usurpation of the political apparatus prevented popular struggles from continuing, and therefore the creation of the specific historical construction of the "social state."

The success of popular struggles depended upon coalitions that differed from the central West to the peripheral East. In the West, the core coalition resided between the management and the labour within the Fordist firm: the coalition of those who had a stake in the company's continuing existence. Together with the trade unions and the political class whose overall orientation was social-democratic, this coalition was able to impose important constraints upon capital. "Stakeholders," having a stake in production and employment, were restraining the shareholders whose interest was capital gains. By defining socially acceptable general conditions of the wage-relation (minimum

wage, public education, health, pension and social security systems, full employment), the “Keynesian” coalition saved capitalism both from economic crisis and from popular revolt.

Upon the socialist periphery, the coalition was formed among the ruling groups: party apparatchiks, state bureaucrats, managers of enterprises, collective farms, etc. In order to keep power, which was their unifying interest, this alliance of groups had to keep the promise of their legitimating ideology and to secure equality and solidarity among the population. The Eastern “socialist” coalition, institutionalised in the party-state apparatus, imposed a more mastodon variant of Fordist capitalism—in exchange for minimum income, public services, full employment. In both the centre and the periphery, the attack on the welfare state became possible when the coalitions that supported it disintegrated.

When, with the crisis of Fordism in the seventies, profitability of productive investments started to decrease, capital in the developed West classically responded by the flight towards finance. Institutional investors (investment funds, pension funds) largely increased the pressure towards profits upon the management of firms, while simultaneously they bribed the upper management by a spectacular increase of their income, by offering them stock options, etc. Drawn towards capital, Western managers deserted labour, and broke the “Fordist-Keynesian” coalition. Faced with unremitting labour pressures, anti-imperialist struggles and the post-’68 contestation, the political class in the countries of the centre started, after the mid-seventies, to abandon the social-democratic line, sided with capital and, often quite brutally, imposed what we now know as neo-liberalism. One of the neo-liberal political elegancies has been that, although the new order had been imposed by the state, often by its repressive apparatuses, it has succeeded in pretending that it is a politics of evacuation of the state and of liberating the redeeming virtues of the free market.

If in the West it was the ruling groups that cancelled the great social compromise, in the East the construction was undermined by popular resistance and, in many parts, by popular upheaval. As Eastern bureaucracies, due to their rigidity, incompetence and arrogance, proved unable to cope with the crisis of the eighties and ceased to deliver the implicitly convened price of social peace, their peoples massively challenged the system. For a short moment, the promise of socialism completed by human

rights in the classical sense flashed across the historical horizon. However, Eastern ruling groups learned fast, changed their legitimising ideology and followed the example of their Western counterparts. In the homogenised world imposed by the swift neo-liberal offensive during the nineties, peoples of the East started to experience what it is like to live on the periphery of globalised capitalism.

In the East, the adaptation of the ruling bureaucracies resulted in a coalition of capital, superior management and political *nomenklatura*—the only real novelty with respect to the previous situation being that the ruling groups now own what they previously only possessed. What they previously enjoyed as privileges derived from their status and secured by extra-economic constraint, they now appropriate as capital gains won on a free market. In the East, capitalist profit has been substituted by archaic rent.

In the West, however, the same blend of capital, superior management and top political leaders is genuinely innovative: it brings an end to the traditional separation of the economic, political and cultural spheres, and abolishes the channels by which ordinary people could press for their interests in the past. More importantly, this enormous concentration of power makes it possible for the dominating groups to compensate for the losses inflicted by the decrease of profits due to the decline of productivity by gains extorted by extra-economic constraint, that is, by ingenious legal arrangements like intellectual property rights, appropriation of the public sphere, privatisation of what used to be common social wealth. In the West, capitalist profit is being replaced by archaic rent.

The two areas have somehow changed places. While the East is developing a rather classical capitalist exploitation, the West is introducing non-capitalist ways of appropriation of surplus value.

The West now seems to be at the point where Eastern peoples had been before they rose in the eighties. But are the folks of the East not in the same boat? No: it was against their uprisings that the new order of domination has been formed—while in the West, the same pattern of submission had been imposed because people *had not* revolted.

In the West, people still have to challenge the system. In the East, they have never ceased to.

# Transformations in the Former West

GEORG SCHÖLLHAMMER

In one of the most frequently republished essays by Slovenian curator and art historian Igor Zabel,<sup>1</sup> he points out that one of the fundamental signs of the extent to which the distribution of power in Europe has changed since 1989 is the politically correct usage of the words “East” and “West” that was established in discussions on art at the end of the 1990s. The “former East” is often mentioned to imply a region that once belonged to another world with a distinction that no longer exists. However, as Zabel pointed out, one never reads the words “former West.” In this discourse, the West has remained a fixed cultural and political entity. Only the former East has lost its otherness, but without becoming identical to the West.

It was not the first time that Zabel, reflecting on the issue from a theoretical perspective, wrote against this hegemonic shorthand for the “hidden differences,” against the calculated power politics behind the allegedly simple parallel running of capitalist and post-communist situations, and against the new non-symmetrical (art) world order. He described the system of wide-ranging differences between the two art worlds (in his opinion still as separated as they had been in the Cold War era, perhaps more so) as diverse and contradictory. And he repeatedly analyzed the explosive power of the frequently concealed differences he saw as impacting this situation.

In contrasting the “former East” with a “former West,” Zabel turns the rhetorical figure against itself, and against the one-way narrative of societies, economies, or art systems “in transition.” The heuristic power of this analogy consists in its emphasizing a mutual interdependency, a dialectic frequently suppressed elsewhere: namely, that the “former East” had become more deeply embroiled with the “former West” in a mesh of political considerations and reevaluations, and so with a history of transition.

In the above-mentioned essay, Zabel does not think of art as a simple reflection of politics and economics, but as a matter of representation, i.e., politics and economics as reformatted,

modified, reorganized, and thereby expanded in terms of artistic representation. The key issue is to show how—before a background of the then-hoped-for dissolution of the East–West dichotomy—the models and material practices of the two art worlds manifested differently or, in Marxist terms, materially condensed themselves in a specific form. For example, what does it mean, Zabel wonders, when this imbalance of power is institutionally embodied, even in a “non-institutional” milieu? How can this East–West difference be used in terms of an identity politics to benefit from its explosive potential? How can an active resistance be mobilized? What strategies are available for countering hegemonic subordination to the rules of the Western system? How can the symbolic potential of art and its connections to many different cultural and social systems be used productively?

All of these are questions also posed by a young, critical generation of artists at the start of the 1990s in the former West. Paradoxically, the first half of the 1990s was a period of crisis in the art market to which, then, those working in post-socialist art spaces often ascribed all too mythic regulatory powers. So Zabel’s insistence on the substantial difference of the nonconformist, and his analysis of the implicitly hegemonic gesture of critical art and art theory from the former West of the time, appeared all the more emphatic.

At the start of the 1990s, in the West European art scene, it was trendy to say that the cultural world was a political world. This was said as a generalization, probably against a background of the emerging new political and cultural geographies after the collapse of the socialist empire, and against the awakening of a mode of production different than the genre-crazed art of the 1980s, which consisted only of installation, painting, object art, and, at best, video installation—the stirrings of what was later known as “new media.”

As the contours of these emerging structural shifts became clear in the art scene over the ensuing years, they were frequently accompanied by the release of a latent potential in the lives of artists and intellectuals. This is often the case when the material basis of a discourse is replaced by another, or finds itself in a crisis,

1 — Igor Zabel, “The (Former) East and Its Identity,” in *2000+ Arteast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West, from the 1960s to the Present*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2002), p. 30.

as it did at the end of the 1980s. Young artists again took up disrupted, hitherto ephemeral, or suppressed themes of conceptually political art from the late 1960s and early 1970s, attempting to reconstruct and take further strategies from the postmodern *horror conceptus* and its local scenes in the guise of battles of material. The histories of suppression that these artists saw themselves confronted with were analyzed and perceived briefly as follows: at the start of the 1970s, the European audio-visual media's first major cable networks began to effect a splintering of the discourse on which the European, and primarily French, theory of postmodernism established its patterns of criticism. In the middle of the 1970s, at the latest, the postmodern capitalism of the media replaced the dogmas of the 1968 approach to fascism, colonialism, capitalism, and oppression, or it misappropriated these dogmas for cynical social policies in a social Darwinist, neoliberal agenda.

In the critical European and American art of the late 1960s until the early 1980s, which formed the still-hidden canon of the more critical atmosphere of the 1990s, and against a background of this burgeoning mediocratization and economization of the world, representing the subjective also implied self-awareness and awareness of one's gender and race—just as had been promoted by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It also implied an emphasis on the process of socialization as a by no means random process within society, but as a process of conflictual interaction between specific individual goals and the institutions and media, as the embodiment of society's agenda. The issue was the difference between a cultural production where producers observe themselves, maintaining their own standards and definitions of success, and a cultural production that draws on the public response—i.e., draws on something that is always interpreted elsewhere. To put it more concretely, the issue was the rift between a concept of culture confronting the control of power apparatuses in the cultural field and, on the other side, those strategies involved in a struggle to establish alternative networks.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, many young artists in the former West were also grappling with this double-edged problem and with a historical

delay: just as the modernism criticized in the 1960s had had its own crises in its time, the reaction to the symptoms of crisis of the post-modern 1980s and early 1990s was delayed vis-à-vis the new reality of 1989. The difficulty there was different from that of the 1960s, insofar as the problem was not expressed as an exaggerated belief in ideological arguments, which were taken at face value, but rather in an incredible mistrust of the facts, which were misunderstood as ideological manifestations.

Yet another key field of reference for Western art around 1990 and its emerging postcolonial agenda had its roots in recent history: in the 1960s and 1970s, the interest in other "cultures" and the self-portrayal of different peripheral societies against the empire of the West—i.e., generally within the framework of a romantic or ideological solidarity by the European left with the Third World—was for the first time defined. This was politically effective at the outset of different struggles for political independence, the Vietnam War, and the beginnings of the crisis in the West in 1968. This notwithstanding, the "Third World" culture was to a certain extent a negative ideal. This concept was difficult to define because aesthetic consensus had automatically remained in the hands of the Western art world. Consequently, one could only be engaged in the propagation of a diverse set of "national cultures on the road to self-determination." This is a concept that echoes in the generalization and misappropriation of difference criticized by Zabel as implicit to the phrase "former East." In short, the fetishizing of the postcolonial approach hampered a differentiated analysis of the power structures within the newly emerging geographies of Europe.

From today's perspective, there don't appear to be any remaining options for coming to terms with this early 1990s history of suppression so as to come to terms with the historical truth. However, allusions can be made to a number of motifs that were at play in this work of suppression. The critical art of the 1990s in the former West can be read as something like the marking of a rupture, a sudden emergence of discontinuity, both within the field of artistic practice and in the context of an apparently almost petrified arena for talking and writing about art.

The direction of many works completed at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s was linked to new, conceptual, critical media art, or displays of political information, as well as to works with emancipatory references to

2 — This is precisely what Zabel points to in his essays written in the early 1990s. See, for example, Igor Zabel, "'We' and 'the Others,'" in *Interpol: The Art Exhibition which Divided East and West*, eds. Eda Čufer and Viktor Misiano (Ljubljana and Moscow: IRWIN and Moscow Art Magazine, 2001), pp. 130–138.

pop and alternative culture, but also to practices in the field of immersive installations or site-specific interventions in public space. These were themselves often entrenched in modern Western thought, where society is a disciplinarian structure, or at least presumed to be based on an already historically disciplinarian notion of space, adapted from concepts developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

On the other hand, though, precisely this closed, historical nature of the concept of space precipitated a utopian moment that could be used against art-market strategies of standardization. According to this, it was still possible to develop a distanced, even didactic, relationship to the sector's system of symbols, in order to be able to produce a new, more self-determined space. Alongside the solidarity-promoting instances developing in the art scene around new beats and sounds, the latter was probably one of the key reasons why many very disparate local proponents dispersed throughout the continent perceived themselves as a networked field with shared arenas of activity that developed in opposition to the institutions in the sector and to the art market itself.

Internal debate between proponents, however, soon showed the potential iconoclastic power of the field. The project of critiquing postmodernism with recourse to the criticism of modernism from the 1960s could be incorporated into the popular discourse of the 1990s so easily because it had defined the possibilities of communication as such—as the possibilities, which, as a promise of autonomy, were sublated in the disciplinarian spaces and concepts of modernity; and because it was based on the meanwhile canonized neo-avant-gardes of Western art—and entirely blended out contemporaneous developments, for example, in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Toward the end of the decade, and as has happened so often, the art produced at the beginning of the 1990s was overtaken by its reception. So it was put at the disposal of the institutions, and integrated into them. The institutions' aims here were: to reduce information and context in order to make the work as homogenous as possible; to strictly limit the activities of artists and observers to an identifiable set of objects and options; and to streamline motifs of criticisms of modernism by means of a consumerist, design-oriented

affirmation of modern forms from the 1960s and 1970s in terms of style rather than categorizations according to content. Working in and against institutions meant accepting opposition to the institutionalization of the agenda that reproduces the power of these institutions. In contrast, becoming institutionalized involved satisfying the needs of the institutions in their search for new, more discrete, or more direct forms of extending their position. Such a position could be nothing but blind to the forms of art in the post-socialist context that resorted to the same genealogy but were always arguing more directly in political terms.

In retrospect, many of the critical art spaces of the 1990s conflicts and strategies for solutions can only be understood in historical terms. A basic adaptation of the paradigms of that decade appears to have followed since then. The West and its art market see themselves as being radically and dynamically transformed. And in the face of the splitting of the art market with many new powerful centers, the old hegemonic dichotomy of East–West has been overcome by a far larger rupture: that described by the buzzword “globalization.”

In order to gain a different understanding of the current, almost voluntary-looking capitulation of politics to economic constraints, the roots of which are in this period, from the astonishingly helpless quasi-programmatic statements with which the cultural policies of the former European West attempted to argue for and legitimate the consequences of this change, one has to ask: How could economic activity have been almost voluntarily equivocated with a political agenda in regard to culture, i.e., with the two elements set on an equal footing?<sup>4</sup>

In an unpredictable manner, culture has become a decisive factor in self-portrayal and the forming of identity since 1989, both for politicians and the economy, but also for the majority of civil society;<sup>5</sup> and that with a Medusa-like face in which an apparent global transparency—the star system in the art world, or of architects, for instance—appears to be confronting an equally obvious local opacity. Of course, one of

4 — Zabel has posed this question in the context of a process of transformation in formerly socialist countries, and was confronted on a daily basis with it in his ongoing engagement with local cultural policies—in his case, in Slovenia—as well as by pertinent economic and anti-intellectual constraints and a national demand for cultural institutions to demonstrate their economic viability.

5 — See the work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, or James Halloway, to mention but a few (or, in German, Ulrich Bröckling or Thomas Lemke), who refer explicitly to this context.

3 — This is a blind spot that Zabel's texts, using discourse analysis and differential ethics, frequently and insistently refer to.

the basic characteristics of capitalism is that it never adopts the form of homogenous, global parity, even though it projects exactly this into an imaginary space while always remaining unequal, split, conflicting. The only thing that has changed over the history of capitalism in its various manifestations is the way this fact crystallizes. A set of recognizable cultural practices, as it is conveyed in the media, is encountered wherever one sets foot today. The mutual processes of reproduction under conditions of globalization have created various opportunities to plunge more quickly into the histories of cultural difference. Anybody who wants to see this from a broader perspective, or to ignore it altogether, argues just as naively as those who deny the complex, layered situation of cultural narratives for each local context—every local context consisting of a *mélange* of narratives with disregard for one another.

Many people in the art world have difficulty today conceiving of categories like institutional significance and political interpretation as the key problems in cultural analysis, and in understanding the category of culture primarily against the background of economic processes. This is not only connected to the fact that economy often has the capacity to recognize its own fictitiousness as such, but also to the ambivalence between transparency and opacity intrinsic to every cultural analysis. Herein lies the historical irony of the present idolization of economic considerations and its impact on the analysis of culture.

The problem here is not only the executive power of the new art market in relation to its old proponents, governing and distorting the discussion, but the standardization and “legalization” of certain strategies within the discourse of representation, as well as the establishment of new conditions for working and for production itself.<sup>6</sup>

I should like to attempt to close with an example: that of the change in roles for different modes of art-market production. There appears to be a broad consensus that in the former West there has been a tremendous increase of professionalism in the various factions within the market, particularly over the last two decades, which are frequently referred to as post-Fordist. Some of these factions have splintered further into new factions, each generating their own paradigmatic truths—for instance, in the

broad spectrum of positions subsumed under the general heading of “theory.” However, this increased professionalism is itself (here, one thinks, for example, of the discursive milieu of the “politically engaged” art sector; or, to find another example, the politicized media art scenes) accompanied by a restructuring of the institutions in order to delegate formerly institutionalized tasks, such as the development of theory in project work. The economic logic of this project work—as has also been equally broadly analyzed in the meantime<sup>7</sup>—has been taken so far that there is often no opportunity to consider the actual goals and intentions of critique, with these being sucked up by the necessities and restricted budgets of the project itself instead. The critical sector just has to keep going, and the positions at its disposal are limited. It is precisely here, then, that the lifeworks between the autonomous and the institutionalized project concur.

The demands to maximize economic viability on the market now meet, as their own consequences, the problems of coordination experienced by those engaged in this field. However, I believe that they both have the same roots: as Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has brilliantly shown, the perfidiousness of new, more sublime forms of dominance in the old Western world and its separate sociotopes, such as the culture sector, lies in the reliance on a modern, “liquid” technology of power, where the socialization of individual subjectivity is achieved by a subjective individualization of the social context.<sup>8</sup>

For one thing, these individuals work and produce under conditions typical of flexible capitalism. Independent of the activity in question, they attempt to practice efficient risk management. They are mobile and frequently change tasks and combine skills. These strategies for coping have a set of consequences, i.e., increased self-control while working and increased personal responsibility even in formal structures controlled externally, extended self-economization and the strategic marketing of one’s own personal resources, and self-rationalization. To a large extent, the paradigm of productivity structures the social position

7 — See Christian Höller, “Ästhetischer Dissens—Überlegungen zum Politisch-Werden der Kunst,” in *Kunst + Politik: Aus der Sammlung der Stadt Wien*, ed. Hedwig Saxenhuber (Vienna: Springer, 2008), pp. 184–201.

8 — See Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

6 — See Helmut Draxler, *Studie Gefährliche Substanzen: Zum Verhältnis von Kritik und Kunst* (Berlin: b\_books, 2007).

within the “scene.” Nonconformist values, such as autonomy and self-realization, appear to have evaporated into a stimulating essence under flexible capitalism.

Those qualities once mobilized by the critical neo-avant-garde groups in the East and the West against manifestations of Fordism or socialism, such as depth of feeling, experience, and creativity, have transformed themselves into key raw materials in an “affective economy.” Today, nonconformity obviously functions as a stimulating, productive force, where it has not degenerated into a consumer commodity or a distinguishing asset. Many people active in the art world today in the former West, too, have to proactively address the structural constraints that pervade the economics of a project. However, that is precisely how they view themselves. They are always, in Michel Foucault’s sense, an apparatus of power and knowledge, whereby certain exclusions remain unavoidable; what can be said and what cannot, the “true” and the “not true,” is continually being renegotiated.

It is in the same context that the possibility of finding a way out of the apparent totality of

capitalist systems of power and domination also remains open. Even if this route does not currently appear to be designated as a major project, it is involved in the struggle with the opaque local conditions in many places. This holds true despite all the “virtuoso servility” that freelance workers and artists have to muster precisely where diverse and multifaceted work with archives and on situations is involved, on whose horizons a parallel and more horizontal writing of art history is beginning to develop that is more informed than the mainstream canon allows for. Which brings us back to our original point of departure: at issue is an attitude toward dominant power structures—defined by either a pure, if need be, cynical realpolitik, or by the admission of a critical moment. One always has the choice.

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## Flying High: Cristina Ricupero Talks to Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas

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**CRISTINA RICUPERO:** Issues linked to public space and Lithuanian identity have been omnipresent throughout your artistic practice, taking different forms in each particular case. One of your first projects, in 1993, consisted of initiating an artist-run interdisciplinary programme at the former Cultural Palace of Railway Workers in Vilnius. Flexible and ready to adapt to changing situations, Jutempus Space (1993–97) was formed according to the specific needs of each project. Can you comment on the urgency of creating such a space in Vilnius at that particular time (two years after independence) and on how collaboration has shaped the nature of your artistic practice?

**NOMEDA AND GEDIMINAS URBONAS:** At that time we were looking to set up our own self-governed space that could operate outside the

disintegrating governmental centres and newly born commercial ones. Do It Yourself, Get Organised—these were sentiments that haunted our imagination for the space. Such a project could only be realised in the gap between two systems: one that was no longer and the other one that was not yet. We wanted to build a space for the production of autonomous thinking; to take a stand against the dominating Soviet bourgeoisie, speculators, and the privileged generation of modernist artists. This was urgent, as a political and cultural act, as well as a condition for survival.

As the market that substituted the planned economy blindly repeated totalitarian habits, we were inspired to critique the (potential) commodification of the art object. For us, it was a political decision to build a space for artistic



practice that could function as an alternative to what was produced for the gallery: a space that could reflect the dialectics of a hybrid experience of communism and capitalism, negotiating both systems in search of emancipation. Jutempus encouraged different forms of practice, with an emphasis on process, participation, interdisciplinarity and artistic research. As program leaders, we developed certain attitudes towards collective practice, which could be framed as design of organizational structures. And for *Ground Control* (1997), we were event organisers without participating in the exhibitions—acting as guides for other artists and agencies involved in the project.

Designing socially engaged collaborative frameworks led us to the limits of the physical space and our interest in the agencies that construct the space of art. We began to explore new relationships with audiences and left the Cultural House of Railway Workers and began working with television as a space for projects and research and as a platform for art production (tvvv.plotas project).

**CR:** Let's talk about *Pro-test Lab* [initiated in Vilnius in 2005], as it functioned like an independent art space aimed at reclaiming public space and at trying to reform or restore some kind of civic sentiment or awareness in Lithuanian society. (*Villa Lituania* [2007] seems to follow the same concerns.) *Pro-test Lab* occupied the entrance hall of the largest cinema in Lithuania, Lietuva, to create, as the name indicates, a space for disobedience, for protest against the possible disappearance of Lietuva—focusing on the discourse of public space versus corporate privatisation. *Pro-test Lab* was made for the *Populism* exhibition [Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, 2005]. Can you talk a bit about this project and its evolution?

**NU/GU:** The invitation to participate in *Populism* forced us to consider positive aspects within the notion of populism and their deployment within our art practice. Cinema Lietuva was chosen, as it is a landmark public building and public space. As you may know, it was the largest and last cinema to be privatised in Vilnius, and its cause has illuminated many suppressed conflicts. The architecture of the building and square belong to the Soviet modernist tradition, which along with Soviet monuments are today considered ugly and inhuman “deformations” that should be banned from the streets and public life.

We started *Pro-test Lab* at the cinema site as a space taking a stand outside the *Populism*

exhibition at the CAC (Vilnius). We wanted to test what would happen if we brought together different forms of protest against the privatisation of public space with counter-movements from lifestyle or fashion. We intended to build a self-sustaining model for an organised community. For two years it has been a hot pot serving up a series of ideas, including the launch of a new left movement and campaigns for heritage preservation and for sustainable development in city planning.

The events that caused particular controversy were the ones involving fashion. In collaboration with fashion designer Sandra Straukaitė we made a line of *Pro-test* fatigues in a specially designed camouflage pattern. It was launched with a *Pro-test Lab* parade on the rooftop of the cinema—to a host of media organisations. It provoked higher media coverage than any other *Pro-test Lab* action, putting the occupied cinema on the main pages of all the local press. This action irritated the owners of the cinema (VP market, the largest chain of supermarkets in Lithuania), so much that they sold the property to oblivious investors. Meanwhile, the “true leftists” condemned the action for being opportunistic and “collaborating with fashion in an attempt to receive media attention.”

As Lithuania doesn't have a cultural history of resistance, the *Pro-test Lab* created an important space within the public sphere, the fabric of the city, the media and the existing political and cultural constellation. We were concerned to produce a new—aesthetic—language that could empower future protests. (The overall feeling of consensus and the absence of protest were what provoked our anxiety.) We began by accepting the idea that the public sphere appears mainly through conflict, inquiring into the protest scenario, which is not visible, negotiating between fiction and reality, the staged and the real. As we encouraged broad participation, from the very first days conflict between different groups emerged. On one side we had designers, architects and artists wanting “to lay out the revolutionary atmosphere and to design the protest posters” and “the real” protesters—anti-globalism activists who wanted to occupy the space “as their own” as a political statement. Or just somebody looking for the place, a public place that they could meet, chat, cook or dance, outside the domestic/private realm. And of course there were other voices wanting to ban artists, accusing us for privatising “their discourse.”

**CR:** You seem to be sensitive to the specific context in which you work, and your projects react

to and interact with [that context], bringing new perspectives to a particular topic. *Villa Lituania* is a perfect example. In a sense it is a very direct, almost literal, response to the invitation to represent your nation, which doesn't own a permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale or a characteristically grand embassy in the Italian capital. One can say that the project mirrors this diplomatic situation, which in turn generates its own diplomatic negotiations in order to take shape. This also makes me wonder, when did you first consider *Villa Lituania*?

**NU/GU:** We encountered it when researching the cinema Lietuva project, reading into the privatization of public space and later through a series of workshops and talks which explored the changing mental and urban landscapes of the cities, politics and geographies. Simon [Rees, commissioner of the Lithuanian Pavilion,] proposed that we continue to research the privatization of public space in order to look into the legacy of communism, reapproaching certain conventions about communism still existing in the east and west. Once we started to map out this territory, we suggested looking into the *Villa Lituania* case in order to retrace a psychological cartography of the transformations of political and economic systems. *Villa Lituania* was the Lithuanian Embassy in Rome (1933–40) that was annexed by the USSR and remains the property of Russia—what we knew to be the last piece of occupied Lithuanian territory.

**CR:** Your projects are often difficult to realize, demanding pressurized negotiations and sometimes confrontation with authorities and/or the private sector, which inevitably demands your total engagement. In *Pro-test Lab* you had to assume many different roles: artists, organizers, activists, public negotiators, etc. I know that *Villa Lituania* also requires a great deal of “diplomatic” negotiation and that you have discovered that the situation is much more delicate than you had imagined. You might even say it's a “mission impossible.”

**NU/GU:** Living and working together, as a couple, we have to deal with this inevitable doubt on every individual decision on a daily basis, constantly remapping and reconfiguring the border of practice and collaboration. Negotiation as a method has become decisive, especially with the last two projects, especially when it comes to dealing with the very foundations of the system, of order and law. It becomes really interesting, and maybe even radical,

when an art project attempts to stretch beyond its own authority into the field of law, or even tries to redraw understanding of the law. For us, this means reaching beyond the limits of the system. In fact, *Pro-test Lab* has become a legitimate political movement that has petitioned Lithuanian parliament—and the fate of the Lietuva cinema is now in the hands of the courts. What started as an art project has really pushed local, and international, understanding about aesthetic practice and public space.

The *Villa Lituania* project has also transgressed boundaries; in fact, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ambassador think we have “invaded their territory” and are “possibly harming delicate negotiations with Italy pursuing compensation for the occupied space of Lithuania's former Embassy in Rome.” They have told us that “Lithuania is a democratic state, and they would not restrain artistic expression, although they insist on the sensitivity of the case, as Russians and Italians do not accept even the mention of the name *Villa Lituania*.” At this point we should articulate that the art project *Villa Lituania* is not about reclaiming the house, nor about making claims about Russians or Italians, but rather to look at the traumatized territory of *Villa Lituania* and possibly remap and reroute it into emancipated scenarios.

**CR:** In most of your projects, such as *Transaction*, *Ruta Remake*, *Pro-test Lab* and now *Villa Lituania*, you work with preexisting communities and also establish your own interdisciplinary network. Your projects are built around a set of public collaborations and discussions that sometimes bring unexpected constellations of people and strange encounters to the fore. Thinking specifically of *Villa Lituania*, you are working with pigeon breeders and architects in Italy and Lithuania to build a pigeon loft in Rome, with Lithuanian glass fabricators, with journalists, diplomats and politicians, etc. Can you talk about this way of working?

**NU/GU:** Our engagement with different groups and audiences evolves from our interest in how an art project can become a new space for connecting existing territories and groups that seem to be defined and disparate. As Jacques Rancière points out, “Precincts of art lend themselves more readily today than other fields to the redistribution of roles and competences,” so art for us and our practice is always both a departure point and a point of return. We are also interested in the notion of the script as a methodological basis for the creation

of an artwork. For instance, for the design of the pigeon loft that needs to be built in Rome in order so that we can make our race, we decided to make an open call inviting architects from a younger generation to propose its design. (The loft is absolutely essential in order to organise a race between Venice and Rome, since the pigeons need to fly “home.”) And we invited a jury to judge the competition (they were encouraged to discuss and debate the entries and the overall project concept). So the “stage was set” or the scenario scripted—but the outcome was left to a collaborative process. Our methodology experiments with the idea of open source, collective, participatory systems using chance to compose and orchestrate the production process—in the hope of an unexpected solution. And this is precisely what happened when the architect [Algirdas] Kaušpėdas, a member of the jury and former lead singer of Lithuania’s famous post-punk band Antis (the voice of the nation’s “singing revolution” independence movement), suggested in reaction to the young architects’ proposals “that we should not transport remnants of our Stalinist desires to the Romans” and that the best design is the design of *Villa Lituania* itself.

In fact, the original facade of *Villa Lituania* was something obvious that came to our minds at the very first glance. The architecture of the house captures political, nationalist and even personal desires of the place (despite its occupation). We would not have chosen this solution ourselves. Suggested by a former “voice of the singing revolution,” the argument for historical style became emblematic—a symptom of what is happening throughout Europe in the restoration of palaces and castles of former dukes, kings and queens. There is a certain desire in this gesture for conservatism, for the preservation and conservation of a status quo, for consensus, and we thought that we could consider whether there is something productive in bringing such desires to the fore in contrast to the normal expectation for “contemporary” design. *Villa Lituania* as an art project now involves: the Russian Consulate that received the request to build the pigeon loft on their grounds; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Lithuanian Embassy in Rome, who were approached to assist with the process of seeking building permissions; Cav. Eros Carboni, a leading Italian pigeon fancier who is organising the pigeon races; Duke Vladimir Gorelov, owner of the leading pigeon club Hope, who is helping to organize Lithuanian and Russian pigeon

fanciers; architect Massimiliano Fuksas who is negotiating an alternate location for the loft in Rome; Mario Cutuli from the Municipality in Rome and Sonda Litvaityte, a student of political science at the Sapienza University in Rome, who are engaged in the planning involved with the construction site and activities around the project in Rome; and last but not least there are the links that connect this project to the Vatican radio station.

We insist that these connections cannot be simply reduced to support or mediation, as our proposal is tested at each stage when approaching people and is being shaped accordingly. This process requires mutual engagement and learning from both sides.

**CR:** You usually propose multilayered and complex projects that give the audience or participants the possibility of entering and engaging with a set of diverse topics and points of view. *Villa Lituania* is not an exception, and I would like you to speak about the different metaphorical and symbolic implications of the project, from the choice of the building to the idea of a pigeon race, and the choice of the architectural style for the pigeon loft to the very particular location where it will be built in Rome, the EUR neighbourhood.

**NU/GU:** We consider *Villa Lituania* as a plug-in of the *Pro-test Lab* project, as it is also dealing with the idea of reclaiming space. In a sense, it is a continuation of the process engendered by cinema Lietuva. We are interested in the connections between these projects dealing with identity, architecture and politics, but most of all with space: private and public. Since we have a particular interest in reversing already existing perspectives, in the case of *Villa Lituania* we are not asking for the house but invading its territory—not the building but the territory of negotiation. That is the meta-territory that connects both projects.

The idea of the pigeon race came from considering the birds as technology, as media, or software if you like. We see the birds as space invaders. There are references in the film *Mars Attacks* (1996), which present the audience with a number of stereotypes that construct and reinforce imperial imaginations. There is a scene in which hippies liberate a white pigeon as a symbol of peace to greet the Martians, and the Martians open fire and kill the pigeon as they think it is a weapon. The idea of organising a pigeon race also has to do with technology. We are interested in how the technology of the race

itself installs, launches and even crashes, but most of all how it functions inside and outside the art field and how it deals with politics and aesthetics. The race, like a biennale, has its commissioner and representatives from different countries, starts in Venice and ends in Rome. There are similar factors involved in both the race and the art event, such as training, capacities, talents, distance, elevation, winners, prizes and even an auction of the birds that concludes the whole event.

The race maps relations and trajectories of both the birds—flying between buildings in Venice and Rome—as well as the communities that have been involved in the production process, who are all waiting for a final outcome/destination.

**CR:** You often use the word “restoration” to describe your main goal with *Villa Lituania*; can you give us your own definition of this word?

**NU/GU:** “Restoration” processes are manifold. What interests us is the notion of restoration that deals with return and reclamation. Restoration in this project is employed in a sense of recognition that deals with self-esteem, or civic recognition by the international community, associated with a building. Restoration in the logic of this project is the return of this sense of national representation (associated in some way with the Embassy building) that is performed through an embodiment of the building in the pigeon loft. What racing pigeons actually do is to search for their home, which is where the name “homing pigeon” comes from. By building the pigeons a home and symbolically making them citizens of a new *Villa Lituania* or *Pavilion Lituania*, we have constructed a new site of awareness in Italy for them to feel comfortable returning to. We leave the actual process of reclamation of *Villa Lituania* to the politicians. We certainly look to create an artwork or event that will bring the plight of the building and issues surrounding it to international public attention—but using the poetical spirit of the birds of peace, *Colomba della Pace*.

Meanwhile, there is a huge wave of revenge for the past going on. Many people hate Soviet architecture, as it brings back bad memories about empire. They probably feel strong bonds to the past that are presumably negatively inscribed in the space. Instead of finding value buried in the past—and not just ghosts—huge energy is poured into building monuments to the present. This is coupled with the immense privatisation of public spaces; the urban fabric

is being dissected into private enclosures that produce enclaves and ghettos. We want to resist this desperate and hateful repression of the past. We like certain aspects of Soviet architecture because it evokes a strong sense of the urban and of the previous civil logic of our city. It represents a strong dose of unrealised utopia; that is scary but at the same time extremely [gratifying]. We feel this in Rome as well, and especially in the proposed site of the pigeon loft in EUR, the park that houses the famous piece of Mussolini-era architecture, the Palazzo della Civita.

**CR:** Since most of your projects evolve through long time periods functioning as ongoing processes, how do you hope to see *Villa Lituania* develop in the near future?

**NU/GU:** We see the pigeon breeding and racing element of *Villa Lituania* as a self-sustaining model that could be run by the pigeon fanciers. The pigeon race has its own logic, and maybe we apply this running parallel pigeon project to the operation of social art models for the future.

**CR:** You have claimed, in previous conversations, that you come from a generation who experienced both the Soviet and new systems, and that you therefore occupy the ideal position to be able to compare both. Can you tell us how this position manifests itself in *Pro-test Lab* and *Villa Lituania*?

**NU/GU:** While we belong to that generation, we do not think that such experience grants us such a privileged position. It's not necessary to have experienced a Gulag or Auschwitz in order to assess it, and we would not necessarily agree that prisoners have a stronger wish for life than other citizens. We are not so optimistic about this kind of experience at the moment, and we do not want to capitalise on the privilege of having lived under both systems. We are indeed haunted with a certain distrust for the system, and this makes us constantly question things and renders all artistic activity somehow troublesome, anxious and sometimes counter-productive. At the same time, however, we are lucky that we do not have to have the trivia of the hip-hop generation to prove our rebellion.

Probably only by knowing both systems can one better understand how public space is constructed under the totality of both socialism and capitalism; both attempt to pervert public space. In *Pro-test Lab* and *Villa Lituania*, we look into political activism that constructs public space. If the totalitarian Soviet system perverted public

space into an imitation by staging or performing, we still have remains of the architectural and urban constructions, spaces that with political will were designed for public gatherings and debates. Today such spaces are privatised and squeezed to a peep-show parody that imitates public-ness. In our project, we are interested in the recycling of such spaces.

**CR:** As you are involved with socially engaged collective activities, it is worth addressing the current debate around this form of practice. Critics such as Claire Bishop claim that the social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism; aesthetics have been overtaken by ethics. In other words, this type of practice can escape and avoid aesthetical criticism because of the domination of ethicality in art practice—"good intentions" are good enough. Can you comment on this and define your approach to social issues, or to the concept of the social itself?

**NU/GU:** This discussion on the incapacity of aesthetic judgement for participatory and collective-based art practice reminds us of recent talks about the problem criticism had facing new media arts, whereby aesthetic experience cannot be defined in the same terms as in the "traditional" art scene. We wonder if there is another type of experience and also wonder whether critics are muting or do not yet have the tools to describe such experience. For instance, Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) could be framed via an experience of the organisational structure of the work. This cannot be conveyed by its surface, as we experience this without looking at the work, via information sources. Employing different channels of perception, engaging socially and politically, there is another dimension to participating than just the ethical or aesthetic. It has to do with organisation of the space, with architecture and scripting.

**CR:** Public art has traditionally been static in its approach, placing works in public areas with the assumption that they will add significance to, or decorate, a site. Your projects seem to function in a very different way. What is your own perception of public art in relation to your practice, and how do you define public work?

**NU/GU:** We think the notion of "public" has changed since the nineteenth century, since the era of mechanical reproduction and its technological successors. The notion of time has made a huge impact on cultural production. Unfortunately, this has been of little impact in the domain of public art, as the habit of desperately raising monuments continues to exist—despite the fact that the meaning of public space today covers a much larger territory than just a square. And the topology of a given space and its borders are in constant flux. We are interested in exploring fringes, mapping borderlines of public space through our projects, as we do not know for certain where to find the centre or the square. This attitude requires a specific form of expression and aesthetics, if you like. Otherwise we would be happy with monuments in the central square, but they have been standing on their pedestals for too long already. Ultimately, public work must intersect with the social domain, and politics must invade their territories; otherwise, it is just semi-public work.

For us, public art is not the art that brings images into the gallery, or any other assigned location, be it a wall in the museum or central square; it's a work that engages with territories and transgresses borders of the assigned territories. This assault is always political, and besides creating new types of experience, it moves beyond the law.

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# The New Europe: The Culture of Mixing and the Politics of Representation

MARIUS BABIAS

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## 1. Ethnopluralism and Identity Politics

Eastward expansion of the European Union and realignment of its common foreign and security policy are leading to a new perspective for European art and culture in a setting of international free trade, globalization, and identity politics. Some of the groundbreaking artistic works of recent years—from both East and West—deal with questions of identity politics, relating to the body, gender, and cultural status within social and transcultural parameters. At first, “identity politics” seems to be a puzzling term, one that could serve as the foundation for constructing an ethnic-cultural community—a term that can describe the militarization of the social sphere that spread across Europe in the course of the Yugoslavian wars.

However, “identity politics,” in a context of artistic self-empowerment directed to gaining a political voice, has nothing to do with the idea of the ethnic or the apparently liberal concept of “ethnopluralism” that was in fact invented by the “new” right. Ethnopluralism may mean recognition of the differences between the ethnic groups (nations), but only in order to exclude them from the Eurocentric dispositive of civilization and dispatch them to the cultural periphery. The concept of ethnopluralism means nothing other than cultural apartheid and segregation of unwanted and discriminated groups, and is the prime adversary of “identity politics.”

After World War II, a series of research projects and publications initiated by UNESCO delegitimized biological racism, placing it beyond the pale of society, and scientists have proven that there is no scientific basis for “race.”

As a result, in recent decades racists have increasingly resorted to culturalistic arguments. “Mentality” and “culture” are central terms used to construct difference and exclusion. In this argumentation, the fundamental differences between people and groups of people are no longer based on “race,” but on a supposedly unchangeable mentality.

The “culture” thesis is brought to bear, for example—by mainstream politicians as well

as the extreme right—when discussion turns to the question of Turkey joining the European Union. Turkey does not belong to the Christian European culture, they say, and is therefore not part of Europe either. Alongside the charge of torture, the European People’s Party (EPP, the alliance of all the conservative parties represented in the European parliament) has recently added a demographic argument against admitting Turkey: while birth rates are sinking in western Europe, Turkey expects to have a population of 100 million by the end of the twenty-first century (thirty million more than today), which would make it the most populous state in Europe. This demographic scenario unashamedly keeps alive the fear of Muslim “swamping” of Europe and revives the centuries-old cultural attributions of Turkey as “Oriental.” Defining a group of people as a “race” or “ethnic group” is a societal process, an “invention of the other” (Jacques Derrida)—an invention that will not remain an inconsequential fiction once it has been let loose in the world, but instead can have barbaric consequences, as demonstrated by the “ethnic” wars and conflicts of recent years not only in the Balkans, but also in North and Central Africa.

“Identity politics” intends the opposite of culturalism, essentialism, and ethnopluralism; it is a tool that can be used to describe body, gender, and cultural status within the rapidly changing social and transcultural parameters after the end of the Cold War. The questions and analyses of identity politics are a specific way of looking at the transition; they provide a critical accompaniment as the European landscapes grow together, lead to a practice of breaking out of established ways of thinking, and offer techniques for intervening in reality.

“Identity politics” in the context of artistic self-empowerment draws attention to the invisible political and cultural borders that, despite all the chatter of growing together and integration, have been drawn across Europe. These borders are not so easy to pin down, but the regions of southeastern Europe are generally outside them. In the aftermath of the

Yugoslavian wars, population groups of Muslim faith are kept out, but exclusion also affects Orthodox Christianity along the script “frontier” between the Latin (European, superior) and Cyrillic (Slavic, inferior) alphabets. Here the negative stereotype of the Serbian undergoes a cultural sublimation.

[...]

The efforts to fence off Eastern and South-eastern Europe are driven by the West, because it is from there, from the political and economic centers, that political, economic, military, and cultural dominance over the newly integrated regions will be exercised for the foreseeable future. In the field of culture, however, we are seeing the development of a perspective that—despite culture’s political and economic impregnation—allows us to speak of a change in long-established reciprocal approaches and their permanent reproduction. The view to the east changes to the extent that for some time, at least since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, critical artists and authors from the regions of Eastern Europe have increasingly been posing their own political and cultural definitions against the Western image and interpretation. The counterargument of bourgeois universalism, with which artists from the East are rated and then generally downrated, builds on the alleged aesthetic autonomy of the work of art; yet the idea of a universal aesthetic language is itself the product of a modernistic ideology that is starting to lose its legitimacy. Dissent, contradiction, and general criticism of cultural attributions and essentialist psychogeographies mark growing interest in nonlinear, deterritorialized positions and discourses, which overcome the old East–West distinction and formulate a new culture of mixing.

## 2. The Transitory Principle of Accumulation and Conflict Management

Western and Eastern Europe are growing together into a transitory space, which is being politically and culturally recast and remapped. This process of growing together, which has accelerated since the fall of the Iron Curtain, is founded historically on a phantasm and politically on the idea of a common European foreign and security policy independent of the United States as well as a European security and defense policy.

The phantasm of “Europe” is a collective noun of bourgeois universalism created two hundred years ago, in the second half of the eighteenth century, when traveling English authors,

in particular, discovered ancient Greece as the cradle of civilization and founded an abstract dispositive of civilization, philhellenism, which served to give cultural legitimacy to the values and economic interests of a rising bourgeoisie. In the following period, the European nation-states laid exclusive claim to the core ideal of Classical Antiquity and excluded whole swaths of Europe as “Asiatic,” “barbaric,” and “Oriental.” (I will come later to the bitter irony of these formerly excluded regions being accepted into the European Union.) This process of appropriation and expropriation of European identity went hand in hand with the colonial forays of the European nation-states, whose aggressive national economic competition vented itself in two world wars.

The age of the old imperialism (c. 1870–1945) was about dividing the territories of the world into colonies and spheres of influence; powered by industry, nation-states expanded with the goal of strengthening their own respective national economies and extending territorial control to the largest possible area. The old imperialism was based not on the world market or globalization of capital, but on the drive for territory and self-sufficient national economies. The turning point in the metamorphosis of imperialism came in 1945, when weakened European nation-states, having lost their overseas colonies one by one, were no longer able to be territorially expansive powers—for economic as well as political and military reasons. At a meta level, the United States took on the role of the “ideal collective imperialist” (Robert Kurz); territorial expansion—which finally lost its attraction and tended to become a burden instead as capital globalized and transnational corporations and multinationals emerged—was superseded by a transitory principle of accumulation and conflict management. In a way the United States became the international protecting power of capitalism, with a global military presence today in sixty-five countries on all continents. To this day NATO—founded in 1949 and dominated by the United States—serves both to politically integrate the now militarily insignificant European nation-states and also to guard the West’s economic interests.

In the Cold War era, only the Soviet Union was able to maintain political and military opposition to the United States, until the end of the 1980s. The appeal that the October Revolution of 1917 exerted on the whole periphery lay both in the socialist utopia and in the promise of “catch-up modernization” that would put the



underdeveloped states and regions in a position to close the industrial gap with the West, and allow them to participate in international trade through a strong internal market. A large mass of population, territorial breadth, and limitless natural resources may have predestined the Soviet Union to become a superpower, but the repressive forced industrialization of the Stalin era and the permanent arms economy of the postwar period turned out not to be an alternative to capitalism, but state-capitalist mimicry instead. In direct comparison, the United States was the superior commodity-producing system with a critical mass of purchasing power and the world's biggest domestic market.

"The Soviet Union," writes Robert Kurz, "was not a historical alternative, but merely the state-capitalist world power on the side of the historical latecomers, and as such the long-term loser" (Robert Kurz, *Weltordnungskrieg*, 2003). In the end, military and economic inferiority led to its collapse; incapable of applying the micro-electronics revolution—the third industrial revolution—to social reproduction as a whole, with fatal consequences for high-tech weapons systems, and economically too weak to be able to participate in the world market as a commodity-producing system, the Soviet Union disintegrated, and with it the alliance of socialist states in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

### 3. The Founding and Militarization of the European Union

Today the few remaining Marxist critics of capitalism claim that the collapse of the Eastern bloc under Soviet hegemony came about not for political and ideological reasons, but was simply a political consequence of processes of economic decay. This reductionist perspective not only ignores the general power of ideologies, but also overlooks the West's aggressive, anti-communism-driven policies, which branded the East as the villain of history. In a sense, anti-communism filled out much older, premodern thought patterns, which the West had used for centuries to culturally exclude whole regions of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Anti-communism as the ideology of capitalist modernization in the age of the East–West bloc confrontation generated a complete agenda of new cultural attributions, which were now coded in terms not of race and religion, but of politics and economics. This ideology of capitalist modernization, which played a significant role in the political and social destabilization of the Eastern bloc and is now rapidly reviving

after the end of the Cold War, is called the European Union.

[. . .]

### 5. The Culture of Mixing and the Politics of Representation

But once we recognize that Europe is an emerging superpower, what does this mean for the development of democracy in general and for the status of culture in particular? The Western democracies are in decline, according to Paolo Flores D'Arcais, Italian philosopher and editor of Italy's most influential political periodical, *MicroMega*. D'Arcais sees the symptoms of this deterioration in, for example, the restriction of civil rights in the United States after 9/11 (the Patriot Act) and the restriction of media pluralism in Italy by Silvio Berlusconi, but also the egotism of "identity movements" (such as the gay rights movement) that place the justified struggle for their rights above the general good. Noam Chomsky also criticizes the way the United States, as the guardian of capitalism, has mutated more and more from a citizens' democracy into a "market democracy" dominated by neoliberal doctrines and tenets and serving the big corporations, whose hunt for profits, he says, is backed by American-controlled institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. A number of worldwide resistance movements have sprung up in recent years, but the revitalization of democracy by the (anti-)globalization and anti-war movements inevitably has to collide with the centralization of political power that the political elites are pushing for. The specters of the millennium—structural mass unemployment and "international terrorism," especially—are instrumentalized for social discipline and would, given time, weaken the democratic forces.

The contours of the "new Europe" can be seen especially clearly in the cuts in welfare and social services currently being implemented across the Union, and also in migration policy, because that is where principles of social construction such as inclusion and exclusion of (cultural) identity and (ethnic) difference can be cemented in place. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, mass emigration terrified the Western European industrial states—which is why the external border has now been pushed back to the Baltic states. Within Europe, after 9/11 and the Madrid bombings, there is discussion of a series of new security laws, and the deployment of the army to maintain public security.

Militarization is progressing apace. Europe, which gave birth to public space and the free city, is in the process of raising the state of emergency to the ruling paradigm of urban life. Europe's conurbations are turning into improvised high-security survival tracts. [Unlike London or Paris], Berlin places less emphasis on the presence of police and army on the streets and more on advanced information-collecting by the state security agencies when fighting the specter of "international terrorism," which is used as a synonym for "Islamic terrorism." The attacks in New York and Madrid gave politicians welcome new criteria of exclusion: Muslim minorities living inside the Schengen borders come under wholesale suspicion and are subjected to dragnet searches for "sleepers."

While the political sphere formalizes the EU integration process as a geopolitical vision of a prospective greater Europe and forces norms on life and society (the new member states had to democratize their political systems on the Western model, accept international rules of competition, and integrate thousands of European Union laws into their national legislation), the field of culture—wherever it connects with political and social resistance movements—has the potential to bring forth a perspective that treats the process of European unification as an opportunity for creating a critical Europe. The mixing process of culture and political resistance tends to generate three formats for activity, which interact and reinforce one another: activism as art form; cooperation between artists and activists; art as activist manifestation. We have to see artistic practice as a format for social activity—and not just as an outdated bourgeois form of gaining distinction. Seen in this way, the artistic "work" is the starting point for an all-round examination of its own conditions of creation and existence, and of its power in the production and reinforcement of pictures, images, and dispositives. What measures are needed to break out of the role assigned to art and culture in the process of European unification—of producing a politics of representation—and achieve self-liberation and self-empowerment? First of all, we must take up an elementary contradiction of the European Union unification process, namely, the wish to unify the territory of the Union in terms of economic, foreign, and security policy, while recognizing and preserving the asserted cultural diversity of its regions.

Art and culture as counterproject residua are certainly not merely sounding boards for

developments in society. Rather, they are actively involved in constructing a politics of representation, in which they participate in a double sense—as producers and representatives at the same time. Europe's much-trumpeted cultural diversity, which is supposedly richer than American pulp culture and therefore has to be protected, for example by introducing quotas, actually marks an explosive point in the politics of representation—to be precise, the identity-forming moment of the European feeling of superiority over the others. At the same time as the world's biggest pop music fair and congress, Popkomm 2004, was in progress in Berlin, the parliamentary committee on culture and the media and the commission of inquiry on culture in Germany held a joint hearing in the German Bundestag on the introduction of a quota for German-language pop music (Deutschpop) on the radio. Without meeting any real resistance, an alliance of aging punks, Greens, and cultural conservatives (that would have been unthinkable ten years ago) joined forces against globalization, counterposing German diversity against Anglo-American monoculture. France introduced a radio quota of 40 percent for French-language music back in 1996. Nationalizing the identity of pop is a contradiction in itself, because pop has always been subject to a globalization process, which was indispensable in transforming national monocultures into intercultural diversity. In fact, the fascinating thing about the Deutschpop initiative is the claim that pop is a national cultural asset worthy of protection from a supposedly destructive globalized Anglo-American monoculture, and also the timing of the call for quotas. At a time when Europe is girding its loins to challenge the American superpower, the quota discussion appears in a different light. The role of culture as co-producer of a politics of representation is evident here.

Seen in this way, the "cultural diversity" of Europe, which allegedly brings forth ever more finely differentiated versions of "difference" so as to provide access to the "other," turns out to be an ideological implant. In reality, however, all spheres of everyday life from culture to society are affected, changed, and manipulated by the liberalization and deregulation of trade and financial markets. That culture, of all things, flourishes during the course of the EU unification process while social security systems are dismantled piece by piece under the heel of shareholder value demonstrates the power of culture for creating and consolidating the

“new Europe.” Innumerable forums and forms of organization have been set up and institutionalized to provide the cultural accompaniment to the processes of greater European transformation, and to conceal them symbolically.

A critical “new Europe” that allows us to disentangle the ideology of the politics of representation could perhaps be found in the concept of a “culture of mixing” (rather than a culture of representation or a “culture of purity”), which the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy formulated in his investigation of constructions of ethnic identity in the Yugoslavian wars. This “culture of mixing” that is directed against the essentialization of “people,” “nation,” “civilization,” and “identity” can help to contribute new political

landscapes, liberated identities, and options for action to Europe’s future self-definition. Visual art, in particular, is a frontier-crossing producer of a new politics of language and image, which can help to overcome old essentialist ways of thinking. Where they deal critically with the dynamics of the European unification process (a process that is currently tending to produce rather than eliminate contradictions), art and culture are identity-political producers of a psychogeography named “new Europe.”

Excerpted from Daniel Knorr: *European Influenza*.

*Pavilion of Romania at the 51st International Art Exhibition La Biennale de Venezia*. Edited by Marius Babias.

Bucharest: The Ministry of Culture, 2005.

## Entry into (Europe)

MLADEN STILINOVIĆ

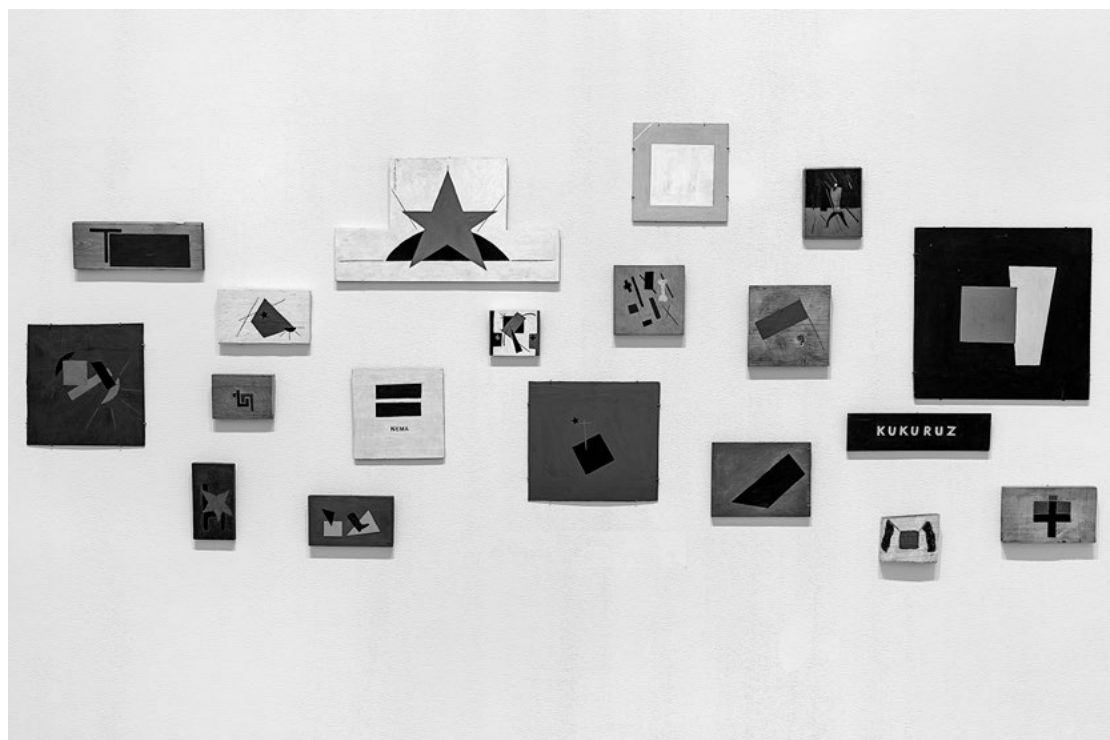
As regards art, it is retrospective—in other words, absurd—because art has long since been in Europe, so there is no reason for it to re-enter. Or, vice versa: art has never been in Europe, so there is no reason for art to enter into Europe because no one has invited art and no one needs it. But why did you call me to spoil your celebration? It’s not nice that you think that I am the right person to challenge or spoil your celebration. Or, maybe you don’t celebrate, so there is nothing to spoil? However, there are tautologies which are unacceptable, such as, for example, applauding to honour applauding.

Art needs no state. The same goes for artists. Once Godard said that he doubted that film is art because mad artists cannot make films. Because, who would want to finance their madness? However, one state, one administration, one madness might still get financed somehow. It’s a hope of a sort. One little state wants to be two states and has the third one, *this one in time* (NSK). Don’t you think it’s a bit too much? Three states in a small space. Surplus of administration, lack of art. How can an artist service three computers and two languages? How can a madman be mad three times? As an artist, I wonder how I am to write three assignments, and I’ve never even gone to school. This also concerns the Moderna Galerija, which doesn’t have an annual plan but a plan for three years, but in

three years there will be no art, just history. You and I, we will have to start learning immediately from the Gipsies. As Cioran claims, “An authentically selected people, the Gipsies are responsible neither for a single event nor for any institution. They have triumphed over the land with their care not to establish anything thereon.”

Another suggestion is to try to learn from administration. Is that possible? One way is to employ administrators and go to the seaside to fish and calmly wait for them to do the job. And when they finish, you, totally refreshed, continue as if they are not around. The only downside to this suggestion is what if the administrators employ other administrators, and then they go to the seaside. What to do then? Extend holidays until retirement date? The third suggestion is to work 16 hours a day.

As regards the artists, they should immediately found a union or some nongovernmental organization which would protect them from administration. However, that organization should *not exist*, otherwise it would represent yet another administration. It should represent just a threat. As those animal protection agencies. Maybe you don’t find this relevant for art because you believe that two administrations spend twice as much. That’s true, but how can it be that an artist can serve such mechanisms



Mladen Stilinović. *Exploitation of the Dead*. 1984–90. Synthetic polymer paint and oil on wood, wood paneling, cardboard, hardboard, paper, tape, and other materials, overall dimensions variable.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased with Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, and gift of James Keith Brown and Eric Diefenbach and Jill and Peter Kraus. Courtesy Branka Stipanić

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without any consequences for itself as well as health? The other day I met Saša Ilić and I talked to him about the concept of this lecture and he told me: “Man, you’ll need two takes of laziness.” I have no clue how I am going to achieve it.

The first task of the artist is to fight against art. The task of the museum is to fight against museums. We should not fight administration because it is neither my nor your job. But, what to do with it? What does Europe expect from you? To be invisible. You can be mad at this statement, but as Yerofeyev says: “Being hot and bothered about something, according to my opinion, means a continuous craving to drink something hot.” When you put all this together, the future doesn’t seem particularly bright: the invisible administrators that will drink something hot, twice. First for Slovenia. Then for Europe. Somehow by beating around the bush, we’ve still managed to come to the topic of celebration. Surely, it is a bit sad.

I think about language (in this case speech) as much as I can afford myself. The moment it is uttered, even in the deepest intimacy of the speaker, language enters the service of power. It most certainly emphasizes two aspects: authority of the statement and group repetition. Signs that constitute language exist only if they can be identified, i.e., repeated, and in each sign there sleeps a monster—a stereotype. But, if I talk to *the invisibles*, it is as if I talk to myself. And what kind of power do I create? Over myself? Stilinović, make up your mind whether those are cakes or potatoes. Everybody will have everything. Each dead shall have a hot

compress, each goat an accordion, each pig an orange, and each ram a new door. So, we should enter into Europe. But how to enter when we are already there? Or maybe it is just our illusion or wish? Where is this Slovenian art? In Europe, in the East, in the Balkans, somewhere . . . ? Now Europe will become the East, and soon enough, the Balkans. Does the art world of Europe want to accept this? Most certainly not, and some time in the future? Well, it still remains to be seen. Do they want to learn history, not to mention geography? Most certainly not. Most European artists and institutions, remember Bilbao, turn their head and money to the States. They’d rather have America enter Europe.

But, regardless of all this, what’s done is done. I think that the solution is the following: we need to enter into Europe as if we are exiting. Remember Duchamp’s Door. Since you are invisible, you might as well succeed.

Of all the insults, the worst is the one targeting our laziness because it challenges its authenticity.

I don’t know why I told you this story. I might as well tell another one. Maybe next time I will be able to tell another story. Oh, living souls, you shall see that all this is so alike.

*Lecture-performance requested by Modern Galerija in Ljubljana on the occasion of the entry of Slovenia into the European Union on May 1, 2004.*

Originally published in *Tekstovi/Texts*. Translated by Sanja Matešić, Iva Polak, Maja Šoljan, and Igor Zabel. Zagreb: Mladen Stilinović, 2011.

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**Maintaining the  
Social in  
Postsocialism:  
Activist Practices  
and Forms  
of Collectivity**

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# Introduction

NATAŠA PETREŠIN-BACHELEZ

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**Many cases of controversy in relation to artistic activism, or “artivism,”** have emerged from the regions of the former East since the end of socialism—so many, in fact, and overlapping so many different artistic, political, public, private, online, and social-media spheres, that they defy generalization or easy categorization. However, the countries of this region that were once perceived in the eyes of the former West as a homogenous bloc beyond the Iron Curtain have at least two things in common: an experience of “radioactive” time that radiates from the socialist and communist past to the present moment, and the knowledge that this time shapes the events of today, which then carry their potential and promise on into the future.

Having in mind the wild capitalism that spread across the former East in the years that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall, accompanied by the nasty neoliberal mechanisms of precarization and recuperation of creativity, of art, and of the vast field of reception that connects them to their publics, let us pose once again the question that has been approached by various scholars, activists, critics, psychoanalysts, and cultural anthropologists throughout history: Can art seriously change the world? And who, actually, is this abstract entity, “the world”? Can art avoid being part of the power systems that produce its conditions of production, (limited) visibility, and distribution, and can artists develop effective strategies of resistance?

We should observe these questions through the current lens of a technologically and geopolitically interconnected and interdependent world, entangled in, on the one hand, an ongoing endeavor towards a decolonized Global South and the Global North’s belated acknowledgement of this phenomenon, and on the other, increasing neocolonizing relations that have given shape to resistances such as the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, to uprisings and civil wars (or more apt, wars on civilians) following the Arab Spring, or to despotic regimes in Russia and Turkey, to mention but a few. Through the lens of ongoing nationalisms and terrorisms, any ideal of art as a universality or as one homogenous entity can no longer be relevant. There can be no single definition of art; it must be continuously freed from its prison within the neoliberal system and reclaimed if it is to fulfill its latent potential to effect change. Yet neither can the field of art and culture exist independent of the fields of state and socioeconomics—in short, real politics. Indeed, it is precisely through its intersections with real politics that art is taking over some of the direct functions that the neocapitalist regime refuses to perform, such as the empowerment of minorities and the enfranchisement of communities working on gender or identity issues. Insofar as art has become a “sovereign player in a social field,” as Oleksiy Radynski argues in this chapter, the institutions of contemporary art today should admit their active political significance in transforming society at large. Furthermore, in order to reflect the important ways in which dissident or interventionist artistic positions continue to act within the field of contemporary art, a canonical division of art disciplines should be dismantled—as numerous examples of such “artivism” included in this chapter attest, these practices should generally not even be contained solely within the field of art.



Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică. *Videograms of a Revolution*. 1992. 16mm film transferred to video (color, sound), 106 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously in honor of Anna Marie Shapiro

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Following the collapse of the Wall, the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe was marked by rampant privatization, by the normalization of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology, and by what Ilya Budraitskis calls “unlimited opportunities for individual self-fulfillment.” The rapid institutionalization of culture and contemporary artistic practices inside the non-governmental sector of the post-socialist societies was catalyzed, as many historians of the period agree, through the role played by the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art. A network of almost twenty of these centers was established from Prague to Almaty with the general goal of archiving unofficial or alternative Conceptual artistic practices, further separating art and culture from politics and state, and working to modernize the post-socialist artistic discourse.<sup>1</sup> The network of SCCAs, as well as collaborations among artists that Viktor Misiano has called “confidential projects or communities,” were “a direct reaction to the social transformation” of Eastern Europe, and were crucial for creating alliances, consolidating friendships, and constructing archives for the future.<sup>2</sup>

Around 2000, when the SCCA network came to an end, new institutions emerged that were supported by local governments, EU programs, or banks, and these institutions facilitated the emergence of postsocialist contemporary art into the global market. Yet amid this commercial boom, theoreticians and artist-activists continued to question the theory and practice of the publicly or privately supported conditions for artistic production, and to develop strategies for artists and cultural workers who were keen to maintain their autonomy relative to the increasingly dominant neoliberal ideology and its neocapitalist market system. On the other side, a wave of nationalist tendencies had been rising (and continues to rise) ever since the war in the former Yugoslavia began in the mid-1990s, and especially after it ended. Online blogs and social networks have been vital in forming an activist subculture across the “New Europe” where political dissent may be freely expressed and alternative communities built and supported. Analyzing the imprisonment of the members of Pussy Riot in Russia and the intellectual uprising that followed after the group’s performance in a church in Moscow in 2012, for example, Maria Chehonadskih comments on the significance of the burgeoning media and internet culture. Describing the history of political actionism in Russia as a history of “scandals,” she writes that “local activism and radical art can survive only if they are visible in media space. To cause a scandal and maintain its effects requires of the artist-activist the creation of a powerful image and a heroic self-representation, as well as a strong organization and a smart technology of action.”<sup>3</sup> In order to understand the ways in which activist positions intervene and situate themselves into the social fabric today, one has to look into the analysis of the circulation and interpretation of images and appearances, their loss of meaning, and the proliferation of new meanings that depend upon particular geopolitical contexts and the immediacy of their distribution.

In Boris Groys’s view, the roots of contemporary art activism lie in Walter Benjamin’s seminal analysis of two contradictory modes of aestheticization: the fascist strategy of the aestheticization of politics, and the communist politicization of aesthetics. Groys depicts today’s world as one of a total aestheticization, where artists, through

1 — See Octavian Eșanu, “On Artivism (In Between Culture and Politics),” *Umělec* (Prague) 2 (2011).

2 — Viktor Misiano, “The Institutionalisation of Friendship” [1998], IRWIN Texts, <http://www.irwin.si/texts/institutionalisation/>.

3 — Maria Chehonadskih, “What Is Pussy Riot’s ‘Idea’?,” *Radical Philosophy* 176 (November/December 2012): <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/what-is-pussy-riots-idea>.

their research, interventions, and community projects, wish to replace a collapsing social state or the work of NGOs that for different reasons cannot fulfill their roles. “Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place—but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists,” Groys writes.<sup>4</sup> It is specifically the debate about artists’ usefulness or uselessness that enables new readings of the questions about the necessity of an autonomous artwork.<sup>5</sup> As Igor Zabel writes in his seminal text “Engagement”:

*In the light of critical art, we realize that a pure, autonomous art cannot remain outside political reality and that it is precisely the autonomy of this art that allows it to be appropriated by dominant—and sometimes repressive—political regimes. On the other hand, it also appears that a critical and political art [. . .] cannot escape being exploited by the system [. . .] Such tension and contradiction between the two poles, however, are what still allow art to create values that cannot be completely absorbed either by the marketplace or by ideological functions, with the result that art continues to act as a point of resistance in society.*<sup>6</sup>

As if in response to Zabel, Artur Żmijewski in his manifesto “The Applied Social Arts” proposes that instrumentalizing art’s own autonomy allows it to take on the role of a tool by means of which individual citizens can obtain and disseminate knowledge and power. Art, like politics, science, and religion, would thus be able to “achieve a connection with reality,” Żmijewski writes. “By becoming once again dependent, art may learn how to be socially useful.”<sup>7</sup>

The figure of the contemporary cultural worker in the context of neoliberalism, however, seems to be defined primarily as an individual rather than in terms of collective enterprise, as Bojana Cvejić has argued elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, she writes, “Redefining the ‘working-with’ frame, taking this condition further than the autonomous self-validating concepts by individual authors” has the power to enable meaningful collaborations.<sup>9</sup> In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, the history of collective artistic action as a thought- and form-related process with a specific interest in politicality seems to be specifically tied to a history of self-organization and self-institutionalization as artistic practice, as opposed to the dominant market mechanism today, wherein value is predicated on individual artistic “genius.” Forms of collective production and curating of contemporary art from this region bear what Alina Şerban here deems “emancipatory effects.” Yet having an effect, Żmijewski claims, “implies some kind of power, and having power is what art is most afraid of [. . .] but art has the power to name and define, to intervene in the working of culture, exert pressure on elements of the social structure by turning them into artefacts (art works).”<sup>10</sup>

Let us end by establishing the temporal dimension of an artwork as the location

4 — Boris Groys, “On Art Activism,” *e-flux journal* 56 (2014): <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/>.

6 — Igor Zabel, “Engagement,” in *Ausgeträumt* (Vienna: Secession, 2002).

7 — Artur Żmijewski, “The Applied Social Arts,” *Krytyka Polityczna* (Warsaw), 11–12 (2007).

8 — Bojana Cvejić, “Collectivity? You Mean Collaboration,” *Transversal*, January 2005: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1204/cvejic/en>.

9 — Ibid.

10 — Żmijewski, “The Applied Social Arts.”

5 — For a vigorous debate surrounding the terms “usefulness” and “uselessness,” as well as around various interpretations of the notion of usefulness of contemporary artistic practices, see the conversation between Charles Esche and Manuel Borja-Villel, “Use, Knowledge, Art and History,” in Nick Aikens, Thomas Lange, Jorinde Seijdel and Steven ten Thije, eds., *What’s the Use? Constellations of Art, History, and Knowledge* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2016).

of potential resistance towards the entangled political and cultural fields. By considering time as their focal point, Misiano argued, confidential projects and communities institutionalize friendship among cultural actors, whereby friendship is “the only social institution in which time is not determined by external circumstances: it is determined by the participants themselves. Friendly communication is not established through formalized procedures, but through the rhythm discovered by the participants when they listen to each other. The members of the confidential community have a common goal: to create a special temporal regime to oppose the social regime, the regime of thought.”<sup>11</sup> Or in the visionary words of Igor Zabel, “It is the particular experience of the ‘not-yet-colonized’ time which functions as ‘the real,’ as the point of resistance which cannot be assimilated and appropriated by the system.”<sup>12</sup>

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11 — Misiano, “The Institutionalization of Friendship.”

12 — Zabel, “Engagement.”

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## Summary of Critical Texts

DAVID PLATZKER

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**The texts in this chapter speak to the economic and political environments that** gave rise to art actions that put the tropes of artistic engagement in the service of societal and political transformation, charting the conditions of radical change throughout Central and Eastern Europe that radicalized artists. In the process, the texts draw an unambiguous dichotomy between artists of the West, who have largely acknowledged commodification as not simply normal or inherent to the production and exchange of artworks but further crafted art specifically addressing this situation, directly against artists of the East, whose activist inclinations were constructed on tendencies of interventionist artistic and collective performative actions.

Viktor Misiano’s text defines this platform, with a retrospective account written in 2006 of “the return of the interactive, socially oriented gesture” that swept through the Moscow art scene in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Misiano aligns these collectivist actions with Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential theory of relational aesthetics and contemporaneous activities in the West, he makes key distinctions, among the most important: “Whereas Western artists sought to construct an internal autonomy outside of official institutions, in Russia the construction of autonomy was meant to compensate for the ‘flight of the institutions.’” Ilya Budraitskis, too, writes of the Moscow scene of the 1990s, but from an additional decade’s remove in 2016, which garners him the additional temporal distance to tie the Moscow Actionists’ “yearning for the state” to the ongoing crises precipitated by neoliberal capitalism and the seemingly interminable erosion of state sovereignty. Expanding out across the region, Alina Șerban finds room for optimism in her brief survey of independent and collectivist art practices across Eastern Europe, classifying them as “emancipatory”—freed not only from communism but, some twenty-five years after its collapse, free to renounce the dichotomy of “center-periphery (West-East).” Liberated as they were



to evolve unbounded by the dictates of institutionalism, these practices forged new and vital ways “to approach differently the production of art and its position in the public space,” reflecting what Šerban describes as “immense imaginative and theoretical potential”—a potential to which even these practices’ “precariousness and seeming institutional marginality” are, in Šerban’s view, critical. Other writers are less sanguine. Aldo Milohnić chronicles two principal public art actions that took place in Slovenia in the early 2000s. “The transversality of these practices and their hybrid nature enable quick passages from the predominantly artistic into the predominantly political sphere and back,” Milohnić writes. “In combination with creative protest events, this creates a kind of post-Fluxus atmosphere of relative emancipation through experimental practice.” Nevertheless, the one material result of this emancipation is a sense of precariousness, and in contrast to Šerban, Milohnić seems to see in this as much threat as potential, specifically the vulnerabilities of such art-activist practices to reactionary political forces.

Milohnić writes in 2005, four years after 9/11 and during what by then already was a palpable, never-ending “war on terror”; he is specifically commenting on the atmosphere of “security panic” and the concomitant political shift toward curtailing civil liberties. By 2013 this security panic had become a chronic condition while much of the world also reeled from economic calamity. The stakes for collectivist art are higher, as Oleksiy Radynski writes from Ukraine: “Art is entering the fields abandoned by the state in an attempt to repair the devastating effects of neo-capitalist policies and their impact upon social life.” Even as Radynski champions the widespread “community trend” in contemporary art, he wonders why such a thing, seemingly reflective of an innate human impulse toward social collaboration, should seem so remarkable today, only to answer his own question: “It seems that this practice stems from the destruction of social ties between citizens that characterizes the impact of neo-capitalism upon society.” Although Radynski sees art “becoming a sovereign player in the social field,” still it appears to remain uncertain whether art might truly achieve the sovereignty he envisions for it, capable of subverting its “prescribed function in neo-capitalist society, which is to heal the wounds of the devastated society or to serve as an expensive toy for those who perpetrate those wounds.” An extended case study of an art that might be said to satisfy Radynski’s desires for it can be found in Bojana Cvejić’s reflections on the performance collective BADco, the capital letters here forming the Croatian acronym for the phrase “nameless association of authors.” “In the Yugoslav cultural legacy, authorship isn’t branded as personal cultic expression or assigned clearly to one discipline, medium, or genre,” Cvejić writes, limning but one of a number of distinctions she sees as defining the disjuncture between East and West. “BADco’s practice as a self-organized collective [. . .] entails the rotation of responsible roles for each single work according to the varying wishes and concerns of the participating artists, roles that then transform in the course of the working process, rather than following established competencies of the individuals involved.”

Throughout this chapter an interpretive metaphor can be deployed, one that places the movements of performers and dancers acting not unlike visitors in a museum interacting with static artworks—turning, pausing, engaging, releasing, and moving again through space, as an inversion of cultural performers in action on public squares engaging in concert against authoritarian forces to which they must repetitively respond against a concerted effort to seek new possibilities for a culture at large.



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# Conversation

DMITRY VILENSKY WITH KSENIA NOURIL

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**KSENIA NOURIL:** With the rapid encroachment of right-wing politics across Europe and in the U.S., it can be said that the left is in crisis. In the past, you proposed a solution by “politicizing the cultural field” through mobilizing forms of collective self-organization, such as art soviets or councils that practice—not only espouse—leftist ideals. Could you describe the challenges in adopting and translating these organizational models into art? What is the relationship between art and politics, art and activism, according to Chto Delat, the collective you helped found in 2003?

**DMITRY VILENSKY:** We never had big illusions about “real leftist” politics. As Alain Badiou said on the day after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, politics has completely lost any idea of true alternatives. We can easily project this onto the art world where we definitely see more and more Clinton-like figures with rather hypocritical approaches toward politics.

The question of what art can do in the absence of true emancipatory politics is very urgent. How can the notorious autonomy of art function to forecast the project of emancipation and equality? I think we—artists and the art world—should provide fewer services aimed at improving the existing disorder of the neoliberal world, leaving that to the vast number of proper NGOs with serious budgets and structures, and instead focus our energies on forming and addressing not-yet-existing communities.

Again in the same speech, Badiou said, “Bernie Sanders was on the side of rational, active, and clear popular subjectivity, oriented beyond the world as it is, even in something which was unclear—unclear, but beyond the world as it is,” and this is precisely what art can and must do.<sup>1</sup> Chto Delat, as a collective, tries to do our best not just to imagine these not-yet-existing communities but also to make them happen in reality. The task is how to find a dialectical balance between autonomy and engagement.

It is interesting to note that we in Russia have a certain “advantage” because we already live in a situation in which “a field called the liberal arts, including contemporary art in all its guises—in its collected, if not collective, articulations” is under threat, as cited by Simon Sheikh.<sup>2</sup> We have been trying to learn how to exist in this situation for more than a decade and are forever asking ourselves who we are and what we represent.

The answer, which Sheikh offers us, sounds pretty close to describing our marginal position and aesthetic program, which we have been pursuing for a long time: “I do not want to suggest, however, any return to the historical avant-gardes and their resistance to fascism, as fascism today takes other forms, and art must thus also take other forms. It is not really a matter of art becoming propaganda and protest, although I am sure that much great cultural production will now be made in this vein, in opposition. I am, rather, thinking of the arts as a field, of how we will mobilize and find solidarity as art workers in a system that is already undemocratic, and in a democracy under siege.”

**KN:** History—namely, the histories of the former Soviet Union and of international leftist movements—is a major theme in your practice, specifically

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1 — Alain Badiou, “Reflections on the Recent Election,” Verso Books blog post, November 15, 2016: <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2940-alain-badiou-reflections-on-the-recent-election>.

2 — Simon Sheikh, “Art after Trump,” *e-flux conversations* blog post, November 2, 2016: <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/simon-sheikh-art-after-trump/5325>.

**in works like the *Songspiel Triptych* (2008–10). Why is it still important for you and for us to think through the history of the Soviet Union more than twenty-five years after its dissolution?**

DV: We are very critical towards the history of the Soviet Union, but we always consider the lost chances for true emancipation during this period of history, which need to be discovered and actualized. Today, when fewer and fewer people are able to remember anything, this fight over historical memory comes to the fore. Those who keep fidelity to past events, thus creating possible preconditions for a new one, must reclaim the potential for true emancipatory politics. It would be interesting to reflect on the proletariat—the subject of past emancipations—who now appear lifeless, and their “resurrection,” which is very similar to the idea of zombie politics, and to speculate on how the zombie condition allows us to reveal and approach the current state of the world.

**KN: Self-education has been a central tenet of Chto Delat’s work. You established the School of Engaged Art in St. Petersburg in 2013. Seeing this school within a tradition of alternative education, how do you define “engaged art”? How do you relate your contemporary concept of “engaged art” to the historical avant-garde idea of merging art and everyday life?**

DV: We believe in not only establishing links to the ideas of historical avant-gardes but also in testing how they might function in a completely new political, economic, and social situation. We are sincere in our understanding of engaged art as a certain form of negation, because it is about breaking with society as it stands today. But engaging means also affirming, because it affirms the constituency of nonexistent people and works to materialize them. This type of engagement calls on society to transform, and we envision this transformation as a struggle for equality, peace, solidarity, and unity. We speak inside the context of a very repressive, exclusionary, xeno-, homo-, and transphobic society, in which basic ideas of economic, gender, and ethnic equality are under threat. How can a marginal community challenge the consensus of the majority? We believe this can be achieved only by demonstrating a vivid example of how society can function otherwise, and why the example should become commonplace. These ideas reflect a complex dynamic of relations between exodus and participation—the exodus creates autonomous spaces that have the possibility to grow and influence society, and to facilitate this growth, they need to accumulate and instrumentalize all possible resources that do not compromise their autonomy. Only by keeping a clear-cut agenda can we gain power to resist the acceleration of the deconstruction of the commons. But why do we keep talking about art? Art is considered something irrelevant, corrupted, and bourgeois—NO!

We need to advocate for a certain belief in art’s power that, despite all traps, still keeps its promise of the transformation of humanity and radical equality for all, dead and alive.

Yes – to collective practice

Yes – to autonomy

Yes – to dignity

Yes – to militancy

Yes – to unity in difference

Yes – to respect and solidarity

Yes – to equality in inequality

Yes – to the commons

Yes – to dialectics

YES to the arts!

**KN: With regard to the centennial of the Russian Revolution in 2017, you have suggested, “There are certain material traces—places and knowledge—which are better accessible through field research.” What would you say is the meaning of the historical Russian Revolution in Putin’s Russia today?**

**I am wondering if you (as an artist, activist, or artist-activist) think something *can be done* and, if so, what?**

DV: Yes, we believe that there are certain material traces of the Russian Revolution that are best accessed through field research, which we practice with our students in the School of Engaged Art, which is open to both Russian and international practitioners.

I am not sure if we will survive until the next radical change that is any true revolution. But that does not mean that, now, until that time, we must obey the current status quo and stop dreaming, working, and challenging the existing order. The moment of the centennial of the Russian Revolution is a good time for us to resist the official version of this event—the reconciliation between all living and dead political forces under a neoconservative, quasi-monarchist power. In this situation one can deliver one simple message: we must not reconcile with these rules, but we must remind people that a revolution has happened and could happen again. The true meaning of revolution must live within us.

**KN: You’ve characterized your work as “push[ing] forward a debate about what can be art and what art is.” You’ve also been critical of the political formalism of certain contemporary Russian artists. Could you describe some of the aesthetic devices Chto Delat uses in its work and how you see these advancing your strategies as socially and politically conscious activist-artists?**

DV: I, speaking as an individual, and we, speaking for the collective, are rather skeptical about some forms of hermetic political minimalism or abstraction that are major trends in contemporary art in Russia and internationally. We trace our genealogy more to a realist tradition, combined with surrealist and absurdist elements. We have as our motto the rather famous expression by Bertolt Brecht: “educate, entertain, inspire.” We really hope that our works address people who do not have special training in understanding contemporary art. We want to be popular among a wide audience outside the contemporary art world; thus, we are trying to challenge the consensus that prevails in art institutions, which mostly address privileged audiences (or try to reach underprivileged ones but often in a rather irresponsible and hypocritical way). This is not easy because access to the arts is under the control of major institutions, themselves under the influence of corporate sponsors, who are hardly in any position to change this situation.

At the same time, our approach is far from reductionist. We try to construct our works as multilayered formal narratives that can be read differently by different audiences but still maintain a principle of openness to everyone. In our dramatic and tragic situation today, we need to create works that are for the people and with the people. This is a very complex task, but we cannot ignore it anymore. This is the root of any contemporary tragedy, which is our favorite medium. We need to be challenged and to demonstrate the play of irreconcilable forces and fate and not pretend that everything can stay nice forever before it ends. We hope that dialectics start to play a role so things can one day be changed, and people can start to truly believe that together we hold the future in our hands.

# Confidential Community vs. the Aesthetics of Interaction

VIKTOR MISIANO

[...]

A symptomatic aspect of the Moscow scene in the 1990s was the transgression of the limits of an artefact-based understanding of artistic production and the return of the interactive, socially oriented gesture.

On 21 September 1990, the group BOLI (Farid Bogdanov and Georgy Litichevsky) invited a group of artists to go with them to the Moscow Zoo: they all walked up to the cages and presented their artworks to the animals. The action was called *An Exhibition for Animals*. In this way, the group BOLI entered into an interaction with the Moscow artists as well as with the animals.

On 18 November 1990, the then quite young Anatoly Osmolovsky, along with other members of the group he had founded, Expropriation of the Territory of Art (the Russian acronym is ETI), opened a two-week festival of French New Wave film in one of Moscow's cultural clubs, the so-called Dom Medika (Medic House). Each day a new film was shown, and each day, to the astonishment of the audience, art actions were interjected into the process of viewing the film; these were actions/commentaries on whichever film was being screened. Thus Osmolovsky entered into an interaction with the masterpieces of French cinema of the 1960s as well as with the public in the auditorium.

At the same time, in April 1991, I began my initial preparations for the project *Scientific Investigation* [...]. Having been invited to put together a small project that would problematise the phenomenon of the "Other" in the contemporary world, I went to the artist Yuri Albert and asked him to name his "Other" and to give me a written explanation of his selection along with one of his characteristic small-format works. Later, I presented the same request to Yuri Albert's "Other" (the group SZ), and from there on the chain kept growing. In the final count, all the materials I had collected—the works and texts of the various artists—were exhibited in plexiglass boxes. Their arrangement on the wall followed the logic of how the "experiment" had developed, while severe black arrows, transferred onto the wall, indicated the direction of the chain. In other words, instead of making a traditional thematic exhibition, I

entered into an interaction with the artists and, through my actions, forced them into an interaction with one another.

The *NSK Embassy* became yet another example of relational aesthetics for Moscow, one that was particularly mature and well articulated. A similar aesthetics was already at work in the very programme behind the revival of APT-ART—that of inviting foreign artists to exhibit in Moscow in private spaces such as the home or studio of an artist. In this, professional representation was intended to dissolve in an environment of human interaction. In the three rooms of the *NSK Embassy*, regular seminars and discussions were held: presentations by the Noordung theatre group, screenings of video materials, and so on. In this way IRWIN did, in fact, instigate the interaction of two cultural situations, and it laid the foundation for an entire history of subsequent interactions. What is more, in the discussions at the *NSK Embassy*, a group of Moscow artists who recognised each other as kindred spirits came together; these artists would later take part in most of the performative projects I organized.

All of these projects—and this list and description could be extended—fully meet the criteria [Nicolas] Bourriaud provides for relational aesthetics. They all share an orientation towards "transforming the spectator of the work into its direct participant and auditor"; this refers to the attempt to work "with the sphere of mutual interpersonal relationships . . . to bring into effect various forms of social exchange, processes of communication in their concrete dimension—the mutual conjoining of different individuals and human groups."<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this orientation that defines the most advanced art of the 1990s: for this aesthetics, "the sphere of social interaction is the same thing that mass production had been previously for pop art and minimalism."<sup>2</sup>

At this stage we can draw our first conclusion: at the beginning of the 1990s—indeed, for the first time since the end of World War II—the most innovative forms of artistic practice

1 — See N. Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les Presses du réel, Paris, 1998, p. 45.

2 — Ibid., p. 46.

proclaimed themselves simultaneously in both Western Europe (or to put it more broadly, on the international scene) and in Russia and Eastern Europe. This fact in itself justifies our defining the artistic scene of those years as a global one, subject to transverse processes. But the question remains: how did this become possible? Why did these artistic tendencies appear so early in the eastern part of Europe, and in such mature and reflective forms? To what extent was the practice of relational aesthetics rooted in the local problematic of Russia, which itself was what brought this practice to life?

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In one of the crucial texts of the collection *Esthétique relationnelle*, the essay “*L’art des années 90*” [“Art of the 1990s”], Bourriaud proposes a typology for the diverse forms of this artistic practice. Thus, in the category “*connections et rendez-vous*” (“connections and appointments”), he includes work that takes the form of a “business card, a notebook with addresses, or procedures for opening an exhibition. It is precisely such works that shape the artistic environment and endow it with the dimension of an interaction.”<sup>3</sup> The next category in Bourriaud’s typology is “*convivialité et rencontres*” (“conviviality and encounters”): here he refers to artists who help to establish “a café or bar, who organise a holiday or debates on the radio, who ‘take up residence’ for an extended period in an art gallery,” and so on.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to examples from Western European art practices that illustrate the category “conviviality and encounters” in “*L’art des années 90*,” one might add Vadim Fishkin’s *Darkness Orbit*. In the spring of 1993, Fishkin “sneaked” his works into other artists’ exhibitions and displayed them only at night. Each night, from midnight to dawn, he would, with a ring full of keys, take whoever was interested around to all six galleries in the complex of the Centre for Contemporary Art [in Moscow].

In the category “connections and appointments,” one might also mention Anatoly Osmolovsky’s publication *mailRadek*. From 1995–99, six hundred people (four hundred in Russia and two hundred foreigners) regularly found envelopes in their mailboxes with a text commenting on the current events of day-to-day artistic life.

On 26 November 1992, Yuri Babich made both an “encounter” and an “appointment”

with his work *Wedding*. A large banquet table, festively laid out, was set up in a gallery space; at the head of the table the artist himself sat next to a young woman in a bridal dress, while a marriage certificate, issued for the very same date, hung in a frame on the wall.

From a sociological point of view, all these examples deal with the construction of the autonomy of the artistic life, its internal rituals. In explaining the symptomatic features of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud associates it with a disillusionment in critical philosophy among artists and intellectuals in the 1990s: “The subversive and critical function of contemporary art is from now on realised in the invention of lines of individual or collective flight, in temporary and nomadic constructions by means of which the artist models and transmits certain disorderly situations.”<sup>5</sup>

The Moscow experience can only be partially recognised in this definition. The demise of the ideological order, in fact, stripped art of its former legitimacy and forced it to seek a new identity. For those in the art community, it led to a heightened feeling of internal mutual dependence. Moscow artists, then, would not be able to see themselves in this orientation towards “individual or collective flight.” Whereas Western artists sought to construct an internal autonomy outside of official institutions, in Russia the construction of autonomy was meant to compensate for the “flight of the institutions.” Typically, the concept of the institution almost never comes into play in the pages of *Esthétique relationnelle*: institutions are simply too close for Bourriaud to see; they exist for him in a “zone of non-distinction” (as Moscow Conceptualists used to say in the 1970s). One need only skim the pages of *Moscow Art Magazine* from those years to see the obsession with which its writers—critics, theoreticians, and artists—all made use of the term “institution.” They call for something that does not exist, something they consider to be sorely lacking in Russia’s current state of economic and social crisis.

For this reason, in the Russian context relational aesthetics was not so much the limited artistic practice of a group of progressive artists as [it was] the collective practice of an entire community of people who were imitating, through a system of group interactions, an institutional reproduction of artistic life. These collective compensatory efforts led to

3 — Ibid., p. 30.

4 — Ibid., pp. 32–33.

5 — Ibid., p. 32.

the formation of a specific type of community, one that I defined—in an article published, as it happens, in the same issue of *Moscow Art Magazine* as the Russian translation of “*L’art des années 90*”—as a *tusovka*. (The word *tusovka* is Russian slang for an informal circle of people with shared interests—for example, rock music—who get together on a regular basis.) The term was no more or less than the way this community referred to itself; at the time I described it as follows:

*Having appeared as a substitute for disintegrating institutions, tusovka is an utterly personalised type of association. Freed from institutions, it replaces them with personalised surrogates. Tusovka does not know museums, but it has man-museums, it does not know real periodicals, but it has a man-journal, it does not have art criticism, but it has a critic, there are no exhibition structures, but there is a curator, no reflexivity, but there is a philosopher, no state support, but it has its own minister. At that, surrogates have absolutely performative status, lacking any kind of verification of production. A man-journal does not need to confirm his status through regular periodical publishing, it is sufficient for him simply to collect materials in his editorial portfolio; a curator is not obliged to organise exhibitions in order to confirm his status (and he is definitely not obliged to organise good exhibitions), and the only thing required from the minister is to show up at every exhibition opening, holding a glass in his hand. Tusovka does not verify activity, it does not have adequate criteria for that—it only demands meetings. Tusovka is a post-productive and purely simulative community.<sup>6</sup>*

While defining relational aesthetics as a post-critical intellectual position, Bourriaud did not, however, strip it of its utopian life-building pathos. Now, however, it is not the Great Utopia of the avant-garde that is at issue, but rather what the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan (one of Bourriaud’s heroes) has called “*dolce utopia*.”<sup>7</sup> The slogan of relational aesthetics is “*apprendre*

*à mieux habiter le monde*” (“learn the best way to inhabit the world”); in other words, we are dealing with the totality of separate small utopias, with efforts by small groups to inhabit small spaces discretely and at different times. Lacking the possibility of changing the world, artists can “inside the already-developed real order of things create other forms of existence and behavior . . . By accepting the conditions he receives from the present as a given, he leaves behind the chance to transform the context of his life (his interrelations with the world as emotionally and cognitively apprehended) into an enduring universe.”<sup>8</sup>

Rirkrit Tiravanija is the artist whose work most consistently embodies these ideas. In fact, the article “*L’art des années 90*” begins with a description of his action at the Venice Biennale in 1993. In the *Aperto*, the artist set up a tub filled with water that was always boiling thanks to a continuously burning gas heater. Meanwhile, right next to the tub were a number of open boxes of instant Chinese soup. The public was able to cook and eat the soup right there, without leaving the exhibition space. Distributing and eating food with others are primary communal gestures; they appeal to such community-building phenomena as mutual generosity and mutual acceptance. But neither Tiravanija in his work nor Bourriaud in his text makes any attempt to problematise the question: who in fact is paying for this communal meal?

It was, however, precisely this question that most concerned Russian artists in the early 1990s. For them, after all, the *tusovka* was not simply an artistic project; it was a real-life social practice. For that reason, any “relational project” realised in the context of the *tusovka* was not only a form of constructing community, it was also an analysis of its social and economic dimensions.

In 1992, the artist Oleg Kulik offered the public a meal of roast suckling pig, but without any silverware laid out on the table. The public hungrily devoured the roast pig using their hands, while at the same time the sponsor observed the action from the sidelines. Unlike Tiravanija’s work, this was not about selfless generosity, but rather about how every manifestation of generosity conceals the power motive of the one who provides the food. On 2 April 1992, at the Regina Gallery, as part of Kulik’s action *Pig’s Snout Makes Presents*, steamed pork was just as altruistically distributed—it was given out to those who had

6 — V. Misiano, “Kul’turnye protivorechiya tusovki” (“The cultural contradictions of the *tusovka*”), in *Khudozhestvennyy zhurnal*, no. 25, 1999, p. 40. Several different versions of this article were published; see also “Cultural Contradictions of *Tusovka*,” in both *Fracija* (Zagreb), no. 14, 1999, pp. 82–97; and *Umělec* (Prague), no. 7, 1999, pp. 34–5; and “An Analysis of *Tusovka*: Post-Soviet Art of the 90s,” in G. Maraniello (ed.), *Art in Europe, 1990–2000*, Skira, Milan, 2002.

7 — N. Bourriaud, op. cit., p. 14.

8 — Ibid., p. 13.

previously been present during the killing of the pig right there in the gallery. As with Tiravanija, this work was about the gift as a ritual form of consolidating community: with Kulik, it concerned a blood ritual of initiation into a community of the elect—a mafia, as it were—since otherwise there could be no community.

On 5 December 1991, Dmitry Gutov created the action *The Small Change of Our Life*. In exchange for monetary bonds, a glass of metal coins was poured into the pockets of spectators. At the time this action occurred, this was the only place in Moscow where paper money was being exchanged for coins: coins had disappeared, since as a result of inflation their value as metal was actually higher than their nominal value as money. Gutov, like Tiravanija, was giving generously to the public, but not because the public, by coming to the exhibition, had been transformed from “Other” to “one’s own,” but because the shared experience of misfortune brings people together.

[...]

In the summer of 1993, Dmitry Gutov subjected most of the members of the Moscow art community to the Lüscher test and also compiled astrological horoscopes for them. He then published his results in a small book entitled *Portraits*.

Somewhat later, on 7 April 1994, at a session of the *Visual Anthropology Workshop*, the artist Yuri Leiderman, having in mind Alexander Brener’s performance *Heracles Maker of Skins*, spoke about the fact that relational projects, personally addressed to a referential circle, had become commonplace. He saw in this a manifestation of intellectual limitation and parochialism.<sup>9</sup> This criticism was aimed not so much at specific artists as at the *tusovka* itself as a community of the self-referential and personalised. An alternative to this community was realised in several performative projects. Of these, the ones most consistent with the principles of this aesthetic were the *Visual Anthropology Workshop* itself and the *Hamburg Project*.

Both projects took place in the period 1993–94 at the Centre for Contemporary Art. The *Visual Anthropology Workshop* lasted a year, from June 1993 to May 1994. The participants were Valery Podoroga, Russia’s leading philosopher, and the artists Vladimir Arkhipov, Alexander

Brener, Vadim Fishkin, Dmitry Gutov, Nina Kotel, Vladimir Kupriyanov, Yuri Leiderman, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Guia Rigvava and others.<sup>10</sup> The essence of the project was a self-evolving discussion between the philosopher Podoroga and the artists: the philosopher proposed a series of interlocking themes, on the basis of which the artists created projects that themselves later became objects for discussion. Meanwhile, the so-called *Hamburg Project*, carried out at the same time and through the efforts of almost the same artists, had the character of a “work in progress.” Here the rule was that each new work had to be created by the artist as a comment on the work of another artist; this work would then provoke the emergence of subsequent referential works by yet other artists.<sup>11</sup>

The phenomenon of the small, self-enclosed community arising out of similar practices I have defined as a “confidential community”<sup>12</sup> (which is very close to what Borut Vogelnik, a member of IRWIN, has called “groupation”). Indeed, this is the practice closest to the ethical side of the programme of relational aesthetics, with its orientation towards “transforming the context of one’s life into an enduring universe.” By internalising the principles of the *tusovka* “as a given,” the members of the confidential community were trying to subject these principles to thoughtful reflection and to occupy an intellectual and ethical meta-position in relation to the *tusovka*. The passages Bourriaud wrote with reference to Levinas, about the human face as a metaphor of responsibility towards the Other,<sup>13</sup> seem to comment directly on the practice of the confidential community, whose members could sit for hours facing each other searching for meanings inaccessible to the bustling *tusovka*.

10 — All the sessions were documented on video and the discussions were transcribed and published in 2000 as “Masterskaya vizual’noy antropologii” (“Visual anthropology workshop”), see [previous note]. The video documentation was edited by Alexander Alexeev and Tatiana Dober, and a CD-ROM version was produced in 2004. In addition, excerpts from the workshop materials were published in *Fresh Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture*, Phaidon Press, London, 2000, pp. 38–41.

11 — On the *Hamburg Project*, see V. Misiano, “Das Hamburg-Projekt: Abschied von der disziplinären Ordnung,” in P. Choroschilow et al. (eds.), *Berlin–Moskau/Moskau–Berlin, 1950–2000*, Nicolai Verlag, Berlin, 2003, pp. 155–58. Another version of this article, in English, is “The Hamburg Project: A Farewell to Discipline,” *Manifesta Journal*, no. 5, 2005.

12 — See my articles, “The Institutionalization of Friendship,” in E. Cufer (ed.), *Transnacionala: Highway Collisions Between East and West at the Crossroads of Art*, Študentska založba, Ljubljana, 1999, pp. 182–92, and “L’amitié comme engagement. Europe de l’Est: Projets confidentiels,” in *L’engagement: Actes du symposium de l’Association internationale des critiques d’art*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2003, pp. 81–93.

13 — N. Bourriaud, op. cit., p. 23.

9 — See “Masterskaya vizual’noy antropologii. 1993–1994. Dokumentatsiya proyekta/Proyekt dokumentatsii” (“Visual anthropology workshop. 1993–1994. Documentation of a project/a project of documentation”), in *Khudozhestvennyy zhurnal* (Moscow), 2000, p. 203.





Dmitry Gutov. *The Small Change of Our Life*. 1991. Performance, Tryokhpudny Gallery, Moscow. Courtesy the artist

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The difference between the experience of confidential communities and the experience that Bourriaud describes is that, if relational aesthetics saved itself from the world of official institutions through “flight” into the micro-utopias of interaction, then the utopia of the confidential community occupied a meta-position in relation to the *tusovka*, which was in itself already a community living according to the laws of artistic interaction. Hence, the practice of these performative projects made use of the procedures of relational aesthetics for the purpose of self-constitution while at the same time subjecting them to critical deconstruction.

One form of distancing was a programmatic and deliberate introversion, even as the *tusovka* and relational aesthetics, in most of their manifestations, were marked by an extroverted character. Any visitor to the Aperto could sample Tiravanija’s soup, just as anyone visiting the exhibition *Unite* could sit at the bar created by Heimo Zobernig. But while confidential communities were not closed sects, it was, nonetheless, only a select circle that were able to get involved with the work of these confidential projects. When the *Hamburg Project* was exhibited, it was the artists’ decision that their work be supplied without labels: so focused were they on their own internal interactions that they saw no need to designate the artwork’s authorship.

From this we can deduce that “confidential projects” were indifferent even to external impressions produced by the progress of their work or its results. Thus one of the questions raised more than once by Dmitry Gutov during the sessions of the *Visual Anthropology Workshop* was, “How does one make a bad exhibition?”<sup>14</sup> The issue here, of course, is not about a disregard for professional finesse—but rather about being in any way open to external consumption. As for the *tusovka*, the more it felt itself to be socially wounded the more it wished to please, to become part of the fashion, to acquire a status of privilege. Similarly, the projects mentioned in the pages of *Esthétique relationnelle*, through their unforced artistry and effective provocation, clearly counted on winning external sympathy.

What is most characteristic about the confidential community’s pretensions to the status of meta-position is the way it strives to

investigate the substantial limits of relational aesthetics. While being entirely absorbed in the process of interaction, the artists were constantly testing whether the process itself could be stabilised. They would extend the length of the process to a year, as was the case with the *Visual Anthropology Workshop*, or they would postulate *a priori* its lack of finality, as with the *Hamburg Project*, which was abruptly brought to an end solely because of technical issues. The artists were constantly breaking rules that they themselves had established for their work. Yuri Leiderman, for example, at one of the workshop sessions refused to present a project; instead, he shared a dream he had had. The philosopher, too, did something similar: one of the assignments he proposed for the artists was in the form of a performance. Anatoly Osmolovsky finally demarcated the limits of any possibility of interaction. In his contribution to the workshop, he offered the declaration that he was prepared “to fight until blood is drawn” with anyone who pronounces even a single verbal utterance. Interaction had been transmuted from the verbal to the corporeal.

Finally, and this is most fundamental, the pretensions of the confidential projects to the status of meta-position were legitimised by the fact that the practice itself could also be located at the heart of the unending discussions. In the course of the discussions, the topic would come up as to just how significant—how relevant—was our creative experience. The problem was solved with the following statement by Valery Podoroga:

*We do, however, have one advantage, and that is the advantage of being in a time that is ours. This is the only advantage that we have. The risk is that someone might tell you that your entire life and all your searching amount to nothing but failure. Well? Who can say that? Today nobody can say that, because we are alive, and we are trying to do something . . . I, too, work, and I, too, know what has already been done and thought. But what if I haven’t thought about it yet for myself! America has been reading and writing dissertations on Bataille for 30 years, but I am only now planning to write something on him. What am I to do—not write or think about Bataille? Or de Sade, just because there is already an entire tradition of thinking about him, is he closed to me? It is ridiculous to talk like this. I am in my own time, in my own spot, and in that time I speak, reason and think. I am a living,*

14 — “Masterskaya vizual’noy antropologii,” op. cit., pp. 130–33.

thinking, writing, drawing being. I live, and I do. We move and live. It seems to me this is where freedom is.<sup>15</sup>

The new decade was inaugurated by the appearance in Russian art of the group Chto Delat (What is to be done?). Lenin's legendary slogan has become a banner for these young artists, writers, and philosophers, while their interaction presupposes the creation of both individual and collective works, including a regularly

published newspaper with the same name. Through their work on this newspaper the group interacts with a broad and ever-expanding transnational circle. The era of both relational aesthetics and the *tusovka* with its "cultural contradictions" is over. Critical theory, the decline of which Bourriaud wrote about in his book, turns out to be relevant once more. The times demand not *dolce utopia* but actual constructive practice, not meta-position but position, and not interaction but action.

15 — *Fresh Cream*, op. cit., p. 41.

Excerpted from *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*. Edited by IRWIN. London: Afterall, 2006.

## Yearning for the State: The Political Strategy of "Moscow Actionism" in the 1990s

ILYA BUDRAITSKIS

In current Russian public discourse, a well-established and enduring conception of a fundamental rupture between the epoch of the 1990s and the period of "stability" of the 2000s (whose salient features are still in force today) has long gained a foothold. This moment of historical rupture also remains one of the most important markers of cultural and political identity of the Russian educated class: oppositional liberals are nostalgic for the 1990s as a time of civic freedoms, creativity, and unlimited opportunities for individual self-fulfillment, while loyalists and patriots curse this period as one of national humiliation and criminal lawlessness. It's possible to say that the claim that the Russian '90s was "a time of ruin" in radical contrast to the 2000s ("a time of reconstruction and creation" when Russia "finally rose from its knees") is today fully part of the propagandistic canon of the Putin regime. Attempts to consider the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, the rule of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, in the context of the formation of a single post-Soviet capitalist model remain the domain of a small number of critical intellectuals.<sup>1</sup>

The 1990s in Russia, in all its political, cultural, and economic aspects, appears like a closed period brought to an end with no sequel. "Moscow Actionism," one of the most flamboyant artistic phenomena of that time, offers an opportunity to radically reconsider the place and meaning of the 1990s as a part of the global history of contemporary times that only now is starting to reveal its authentic significance.

In order to fully reveal the content of the political and artistic strategies of Moscow Actionism, it's worth recalling the transformation of the two global features of the contemporary era: the state and war. The demise of the state and the changing nature of war are linked to each other just as war and peace are connected to each other, with their borders in contemporary times becoming more difficult to pinpoint. The well-known military historian and theoretician Martin van Creveld in his book *The Rise and Decline of the State*<sup>2</sup> writes about how the concept of the state belongs to the modern era and is inseparable from the concept of international war, described by Clausewitz. According to van Creveld, after the advent of nuclear weapons, the classical war, in

1 — For example, Ruslan Dzarasov. *The Conundrum of Russian Capitalism: The Post-Soviet Economy in the World System*. Pluto Press, London, 2010.

2 — Martin van Creveld. *The Rise and Decline of the State*. Cambridge, 1999.

which clashes take place between the armies of two (or more) states with clear goals and are based on the principle of a unity of command, is gradually receding into the past. In the era of nuclear weapons, the possibility of such a military clash is radically limited by temporal considerations: it can't last long, and is dissimilar to a 19th century war (such as the Napoleonic Wars) and to the total wars of the first half of the 20th century. In the new wars of the nuclear era, long wars of position are impossible; there is no place for rational agreements and changing the former status-of-forces agreements that follow the organized military collision of two or more warring parties. Since the 1970s, when the establishment of a balance of nuclear forces finally ensured the impossibility of a classical large war, a period of reconsideration has begun of the very principle of the state as a corporation that bears responsibility for society and fully controls its own territory, and doesn't permit the coexistence of other types of sovereignty.

Nowadays, the main threat to sovereignty emanates not simply from armed individuals or groups but from other corporations which are effectively duplicating the state's functions. New actors, which are not subject to the state, enter the scene and begin to successfully compete with it: these actors include private armies, security structures, and paramilitary units. The multiplication of actors is directly connected with privatization, a process gathering momentum as a global phenomenon since the turn of the 1970s and '80s. Privatization has become the flip side of the global process of the state's withdrawal from those fields previously regarded as part of its organic sphere of responsibility.

The beginning of the 1990s is connected not merely with the fall of the socialist order and the appearance of new states within which the privatization of state property and radical market reforms took place, but also with what the well-known researcher Mary Kaldor calls the "new wars."<sup>3</sup> This refers to the type of military conflicts that initially arose in the territory of Yugoslavia and then swept across other global regions: the Middle East, Afghanistan, and today even the territory of Ukraine. Based on their characteristics, these conflicts don't belong to the classical understanding of war: there are no two opposing parties that could come to an agreement with each other. Thus, in the opinion of Kaldor, the major problem of the

Bosnian war was not that Serbia and Croatia, behind the different warring parties, could not find the best solution for reorganizing this territory. In the Bosnian war, such a large number of actors took part that were excluded from the field of sovereignty of major states that no regional solution could put an end to the conflict. For example, the formula of the Dayton Accords (which were later the basis for the fragile construction of contemporary Bosnia) was formulated three years before this conflict was actually brought to a halt. These agreements were implemented not because the sovereign state came to some decision about a new institutional anchorage of the emerging balance of forces, but rather as a consequence of the effective exhaustion of all the groups participating in this war or of those having interests in it. The majority of these paramilitary groups arose in the course of the armed conflict in Bosnia, not having existed before its inception.

The blurring of borders between military and non-military is one of the fundamental characteristics of the "new war." Another difference: the majority of victims in the war are no longer the direct participants in the military actions. Only a finite part of the population participates in the fighting, and this also marks a difference from the Total Wars of the 20th century, where there were massive armies, which included a substantial percentage of the population of the country. The civilian population has become the main victim, with their suffering extending years into the future. Essentially, the main "content" of this war is the permanent expropriation of the population. It is the basis for the emergence of all the new forms of rent extraction not only by the government in the form of taxes but also by groups who replace the government (proclaiming themselves the government of a single city or a single district). The presence of weapons gives them the possibility to repartition these rents in their favor.

This process of military and political erosion (the dissolution and eradication of the state) engenders that which Kaldor calls a "war economy." The old bases of the economy collapse: businesses stop working, oil is no longer extracted, structural units associated with peacetime gradually fail to operate. And on the wreckage of the previous economic territory endowed with sovereignty arises a certain new economy, which continues to function, although it has completely different agents and resources, and, like a crater, it swallows everything connected to the support and operation

3 — Mary Kaldor. *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* Polity, 2012 (3rd edition).

of this “new war.” Humanitarian aid becomes an element of cunning speculation or privileged repartitioning. Between captured territories there arise borders, through which contraband goods are transported and become a source of income. All these operations are essentially no longer illegal because the law of the territory no longer exists.

“New wars” are directly connected to the disappearance of a clear border between a war and non-war economy in the situation of postsocialist transition. The destruction of infrastructure and former state borders, uncontrolled circulation of weapons, and the increase in actors extracting rent seizes even those territories where there is no war. The war in Bosnia proved to be a tool of such destruction in the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia. The fall of the USSR and the processes unfolding in the post-Soviet space seamlessly include areas of military conflicts (the “new wars”) with local, completely incomprehensible-from-the-outside warring clashes that continue to take place and are included, nonetheless, in a general and powerful trend towards the dissolution of the state.

This trend is well described in the well-known book by Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs*.<sup>4</sup> In it, the St. Petersburg sociologist describes the Russian situation of the beginning of the 1990s as the “fall of the state,” that is, the disappearance of a territorial monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. The state retreats from those zones where it has been historically present and is replaced by certain other structures: by those who are called bandits, gangsters, or racketeers. They not only break the law but also create their own alternative rules of the game. The rackets of the 1990s exist not simply as a bandit organization that employs violence but acts on a regular basis, replacing violence with other forms of coercion. The latter helps incorporate military groups into the new economy created on the ruins of the old economy. New private organizations provide security services and effectively compete in this field with the state.

Such a state of affairs creates a problem, which Carl Schmitt in his time defined as “the crisis of state policy.” In his work “State Ethics and the Pluralistic State,”<sup>5</sup> written at the

beginning of the 1920s, Schmitt analyzes the then-contemporary process of the degradation of the state. That which took place in the 1920s in Germany was, for the “conservative revolutionary” Schmitt, a catastrophe, insofar as loyalty to the state (“state ethics”) was replaced by a “pluralism of loyalties.” This “pluralism” signified that the state began to compete for the loyalty and ethical allegiance of its citizens with other groups: parties, trade unions, or faith-based communities. In this competition, the dominant role of the state subsides, and it turns into only one of many corporations with which the freestanding citizen can identify. Schmitt allegorically depicts this process as parties nailing down the powerful Leviathan and cutting pieces of meat from its body, thereby seizing parts of its sovereignty for themselves.

As is known, Schmitt proposed to supersede this ethical and political crisis through the restoration of the state to its elevated position: it is necessary to clarify (including through force) the question of who is the sovereign in this territory. In the situation of the degradation of the state, an ethical act of will is necessary that breaks the “pluralism of loyalties.” It is precisely the restoration of sovereignty that may reconstruct the field of genuine politics, based on antagonism, with a crude division between enemies and friends.

In Russia (and farther afield, throughout the “space” of the “former East”) in the early 1990s in the situation of politics’ degradation and the state’s erosion, a new contemporary art emerges as the space for the representation of the yearning for the lost sovereignty. An event that constituted this current is undoubtedly the “famous NSK embassy.” This was a large-scale action by actors of the Slovenian cultural scene who had come to Moscow in the spring of 1992 as representatives of an imaginary utopian state. One of the first issues of *Moscow Art Magazine* (*Khudozhestvenni zhurnal*) is partially dedicated to this self-proclaimed embassy, which was regarded in the context of the global crisis of the state.<sup>6</sup> Many authors in this issue wrote about Europe’s progressive falling into a state of destatization, with its bureaucratic apparatus losing its role as a binding agent. The authority of the state disintegrated simultaneously from above and from below: from the one side, from the process of economic globalization and the politics of the European Union, and

4 — Vadim Volkov. *Violent Entrepreneurs 21st Century: A Socio-Economic Analysis*. St. Petersburg, European University, 2012.

5 — Originally appeared as “Staatsethik und pluralistischer Staat,” in *Kant-Studien*, vol. 35 (Berlin: Pan-Verlag Kurt Metzner, 1930), 28–42.

6 — *Moscow Art Magazine*, no. 4 (1994).

from the other side, from the organic nature of the post-socialist market, with the emergence of a huge quantity of local actors, ethnic and religious communities, and so on. Thus, Slavoj Žižek declares in a short text that there are no more states in Europe.<sup>7</sup> In its declaration, the group NSK states that the contemporary experience of destatization is concentrated in one single word—Bosnia—and this renders realistic any quasi-statal utopia.<sup>8</sup>

The participants of the NSK believe that the state needs art in its most radical versions (including in the version of the most radical contraposition to any state) for its self-definition. Art cannot exist in a situation of the “pluralism of loyalties,” because it is fundamentally pernicious for art. Eda Čufer, in the same issue of *Moscow Art Magazine*, writes that NSK is art that has the image of the state.<sup>9</sup> While in the past art created its autonomy within the state, now art must find the answer to the fall of the state by searching for new political and aesthetic organizational forms. Art takes on itself, in these extraordinary circumstances (and with presumably extraordinary methods that had previously not been characteristic of art), the restitution of the situation in which it (art) can politically or aesthetically determine itself in relation to the vanished Leviathan.

In the context of such posing of the issue, it is necessary to turn to the programmatic texts of the key figures in Moscow Actionism—Anatoly Osmolovsky and Alexander Brener. The first issue of the journal *Radek*<sup>10</sup> opens with a manifesto by Osmolovsky about *netseziudik*, which refers to something “excessive”—that which exists beyond measure, is unnecessary, is not integrated into the new consensus. *Netseziudik* is intentionally excluded from a situation in which everything can be freely included. Indeed, the moment of the disappearance of the state is an open door to unlimited opportunities where practically everyone can effectively become the state. Anyone can proclaim NSK or take a machine gun into their hands, establish a private security firm replacing the police in a certain territory, or else. The very origin of this term *netseziudik* is

remarkable, meaning “unnecessary,” “beyond measure.” Osmolovsky borrowed this term from the Volapük language.

The emergence of the Volapük language, in its turn, is connected with the acute issue of the state’s ethics. The creator of this language, a Catholic priest, Johann Martin Schleyer, invented it in the 1870s in the period of Bismarkian *Kulturkampf*, when the new German national state (predominantly Prussian and Protestant) bluntly raised the issue about the hierarchy of loyalties relative to the millions of Catholics who have just now become citizens of this state. The Catholic Church, with its universalism, became one of the main obstacles on the path of this state. Schleyer steadfastly adopted a position of primary loyalty to the church, and for this he was imprisoned. He invented Volapük as a project of universal language and grammar for educated people throughout the world. It was a radical anti-state position for its time.

If Schleyer with his universalism is excluded from an emerging state, Osmolovsky attempts to force his exclusion from a declining state that no longer wishes to, or can, exclude anybody. For Osmolovsky, the excessive (*netseziudik*) is the very possibility for revolution. In the modern era, revolution was possible precisely because of the presence and the definable nature of its sovereign enemy (a king or a government of the “ancient regime”). “We, the heroes of the retreating era,” writes Osmolovsky, implying the era in which the idea of a total and affirmative revolution would have been possible. The aim of the movement is proclaimed as “the creation and implementation of rival programmes,” that is, the appropriation of the ideal zone, the realization of another law that could supersede pluralism and fragmentation that is pernicious both for art and for politics. Osmolovsky recalls a famous scene from the film *Terminator 2*—the fight between the flimsy pluralistic robot and the classical robot, the so-called robot of the “modern era.” As the fight concludes with the victory of the latter, the classical robot (portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger) feeds itself an extra unit of supply—something superfluous, additional but necessary to give it sufficient energy for the neutralization and annihilation of its rival. In this text, Osmolovsky directly gives a radical and revolutionary reading of the yearning for the state, the legitimacy and sovereignty of which, it seems to me, is the key intention (whether conscious or subconscious) of the Moscow Actionist movement of the early 1990s.

7 — Slavoj Žižek. “Es gibt keinen staat in Europa” (“In Europe There’s No Longer Any States”). *Moscow Art Magazine*, no. 4, p. 3.

8 — NSK. “Soldiers, Dear Friends! Peacetime Is Already in the Past.” Ibid.

9 — IRWIN, Eda Čufer. “NSK—The State in the Course of Time.” Ibid.

10 — A. Osmolovsky. “Netseziudik (A Last Manifesto).” *Radek*, no. 1 (1994), pp. 3–13.

A vivid illustration of this is Alexander Brener's text "Art and Politics: A Third Position,"<sup>11</sup> also with a programmatic character for Moscow Actionism of the period in question. Brener argues that a true politics consists in solidarity with the Absolute and that it is necessary to resist the reduction of this Absolute to a banal liberal consensus. The ultimate truth in politics is precisely the realization of such a radical solitude. Brener clearly elucidates what this solitude means: it is the active removal by the Prince [i.e., Sovereign] of everything that doesn't constitute his essence. Thus Brener is referring us to the Machiavellian "Prince" and giving him a very original interpretation. For example, the Marxist tradition interpreted Machiavelli in directly the opposite way. In it, the Prince is the one who, in a paradoxical way, returns politics to society, making the people a political actor. This, in turn, ultimately eliminates the Prince as a voluntarist, who replaces the state with himself, makes decisions, and exists beyond the common good, law, and morality. It is precisely in this way that Antonio Gramsci, for example, interpreted the "Prince" in his *Prison Notebooks*. He considered Machiavelli, along with Dante and Raffaello, to be a great figure of the Renaissance, one who opened up a space for democratic politics, republicanism, and a future conscious mass movement (Gramsci effectively declares the Communist Party to be the "Prince" of the modern era). Machiavelli, who is commonly believed to be a pessimist when it comes to human nature, nevertheless creates, in Gramsci's interpretation, a basis for historical optimism.

However, politics for Brener is death and an end, while art is solidarity with death. The intention of solitude, of irreducibility, the achievement of an absolute sovereignty inside oneself or, as Osmolovsky wrote, "the acquisition of an ideal zone of one's consummation," is the main task for both politics and art. Therefore, any interaction between them normalizes, devalues each of their pursuance of the Absolute, to the acquisition of their own zones of consummation (and, therefore, their own death). In this way, it appears that the extreme radicalism of the artistic project is in its refusal to compromise and cooperate, which creates a unique

possibility to restore politics based on its pursuance of the Absolute. Theologically, sovereign politics—almost dissolving in the situation of the fall of sovereignty—endlessly incorporates in its field all that which is non-political (and even pre-political).

To conclude briefly, it is necessary to say that politics, as in the understanding of enemies and friends for Schmitt and for the Actionists, converge in the point of sovereignty that is restored in the fragmented, degenerating space of state will, the state of emergency of some kind or other, that which Brener calls the "politics of the Absolute." A yearning for the state restores, or should restore, the ethics of this very art. And the reinvention of the state becomes a utopia through art that can be redefined (as the gesture of NSK directly testifies). In order to deny the state so as to establish the most radical form of destatified management, it is necessary for the state to be restored as a visible enemy. Such a supercession of the state (its death, effectuating the political path of self-fulfilment) is hindered by the fall of the state, the dissolution of its sovereignty that, today, like rust, just as in the 1990s, sweeps over ever-new territories of the planet. This erosion of the state does not draw us nearer to but rather distances us from the moment of the effective liquidation of the state, which is necessary for the implementation of some fundamentally different political and artistic project.

It's worth noting that within Moscow Actionism's pursuance of the restoration of the demolished borders of sovereignty (while signifying, too, the possibility for a radical liberational anti-state project for art) lies the fundamental absence of any continuity with the political art actionism of the end of the 2000s to the early 2010s (from the Voina group to Pussy Riot and Pyotr Pavlensky). The latter is characterized by an ethical protest against the state, perceived as a total machine of repression not susceptible to inner schism. In relation to this, Moscow Actionism, which belongs to a preceding historical period, to a large degree still remains relevant in our day, when the global "fall of the state" continues and progresses (although, of course, from a proximate historical distance, it may seem to us exactly the opposite).

11 — A. Brener. "Art and Politics: A Third Position." *Moscow Art Magazine*, no. 11 (1996), pp. 34–36.

Text commissioned for this volume. Translated by Giuliano Vivaldi.



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# Emancipatory Effects: Notes on Institutional and Curatorial Practices in Eastern Europe

ALINA ȘERBAN

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The institutional and curatorial micro-narratives that have emerged in Eastern Europe in the past years have renounced all Manichaean dialogues of the centre-periphery (West-East). These narratives reflect a departure from the phantasms of the 1990s, when escape from provinciality and adjustment to Western artistic discourse was the norm. Although reminiscences of this mirage still emerge occasionally, within an artistic context it is the independent forms of collective association and organization (artist-run spaces, non-profit associations or curatorial collectives) that are setting the rules of a new game, placing their bets in a rigorous, sharp and critical fashion on the “local card.” In the current discursive landscape—in which marginalities are open and their precariousness is on an equal footing with the glossy image of a deposed centre—the ability of critical and production platforms to re-socialize their gesture, within and outside the field of art, has been surprising. These new platforms act differently. In what way?

It is a question which I shall attempt to answer by inserting a number of brief footnotes<sup>1</sup> on the activity of several independent

initiatives (independent associations, curatorial collectives) in the region. Although it is fragmentary in structure, this interrogative text sets out to summarize a few of the initiatives’ common traits. This is despite obvious differences grounded in the social and political conditions within which they have emerged, as well as the specific functionality ascribed to art or to the art institution within their concrete (trans)national contexts respectively.

It is fairly obvious these days, when looking at the social dynamic of the former socialist bloc and at the occasionally dramatic changes undergone by the public art institutions—museums or centres of contemporary art—that any possibility of self-deceit has been removed. The stake of the alternative platforms/form of association defined by “their institution-forming character”<sup>2</sup> is a completely different one. The West has become the “former West,” the same way the East has recomposed itself again in a different fashion, when examined through the looking glass of late capitalism. The disillusion of neoliberal thinking can no longer be ignored and are being overshadowed by the increasingly powerful voice of a new critical discourse in the (semi-)public space. Consequently, we cannot speak if we do not assert our own sets of issues, if we do not adopt our own stances. And these sets of issues cannot be identified, to quote a contemporary thinker, “by sitting in your armchair and pondering intensely, ‘what am I like?’”<sup>3</sup> In other words, in the context of the irreversible transformation undergone by this region, of the precarious nature of daily life and of the austerity triggered by the recent crisis, to be inside and outside the field of art is more often than not, for these initiatives, synonymous with a critical mapping of the local present, without ignoring the dialogue with the

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1 — An important part in the production of these notes was played by my colleagues, artists Anca Benera and Arnold Estefán, with whom I have started the project entitled *On the Imaginary Potential of the Art Institution*, a subjective reflection on our common activity at the Centre for Visual Introspection ([www.pplus4.ro](http://www.pplus4.ro)). The Centre for Visual Introspection is a collective platform established in Bucharest in 2007 as a non-profit organization. Introducing “introspection” as a method of research that is receptive to the specific evolution of the art scene in the Eastern European area, we have ventured into a number of subjective investigations meant to disclose, in various formats, the unexpected connections between the various histories and regional networks, public stances, curatorial dilemmas and artistic practices. As we have not wished to follow an institutional recipe, and as we are aware of our limitations and of the status of public cultural policies in Romania, which are hardly open to independent initiatives, we have attempted to define our own “emergencies” and to turn them into a framework for holding debates locally. The main aspects/themes/challenges raised by self-organization identified by us throughout our four years of activity in Bucharest have been brought together in a publication edited on the occasion of the centre’s participation in the “Projects and Spaces” section of the 2011 VIENNAFAIR. A number of these reflections on ourselves are inevitably shared by other initiatives in the region, as they are practically reactions to the current state of play in the field of culture and to the incapacity of the decision-makers of these young capitalistic societies.

2 — Möntmann, Nina, “The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism,” in: Raunig, Gerald and Gene Ray (eds.), *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, MayFlyBooks: London, 2009, p. 158.

3 — Dragomir, Alexandru, *Crise banalităȃi metafizice*, Humanitas: Bucharest, 2008, p. 58.

past<sup>4</sup> or minimizing the interest in similar narratives. In fact, the regional, trans-regional and trans-national alliances that have been organized in the past ten years reflect an immense imaginative and theoretical potential, as well as the capacity to adjust to reality, but also a common effort of collaboration in order to create critical tools that are suitable to the architecture of the present.

When examining all these shades of Eastern thought, a certain phrase that I find extremely opportune comes to mind as best suited to describe the conditions of cultural production and the functioning of these platforms, namely that of “project institution.”<sup>5</sup> The precariousness and seeming institutional marginality of project-spaces, including when they operate at the very core of the local cultural scene, rewrites their status and stimulates their creativity, leading the way to a number of alternative options for curatorial programs and public debates. On the other hand, the utterly natural fashion in which these structures have organized themselves, in ways which defy the notion of hierarchy and their concern with public dialogue, reflect a new kind of relationship being established between the artistic/curatorial practices (the project) and the space/institution (the context). We could say that the “project institution” notion joins the attempt to outline a number of institutional alternatives with the attempt to reinstate the critical discourse, inside and outside the field of art, thus compensating for the visible malfunctions affecting the public body. The limited duration

and the uncertainty, particularly financial, that characterize these project-institutions should not be regarded solely as the adverse effects of the immaturity of local governance structures. Many of these initiatives have played their (historical) part in the context and, once inactive, have provided others with the chance of carrying things forward from where they left off. It is also, after all, a form of self-adjustment and self-reflection, answering a number of immediate cultural needs: the stimulation of artistic and curatorial production; social engagement; the need to know yourself and the person right next to you by comparing regional historical experiences, among others; critically reassessing and ascribing new value to past artistic practices in order to lay the foundation of a new history of art in the region and of new theoretical concepts applied to the Eastern European type of visibility. To make one last observation in this brief enumeration, I would like to mention—in direct relation with the radical stance of the new independent institutional practices anchored in the contemporary political landscape and in the debates channelled through the independent sector—the analysis made by philosopher Stefan Nowotny, who envisions critique as “the model of a practice (meaning a subject that *is involved and involves itself* in a specific way in the criticized conditions).”<sup>6</sup>

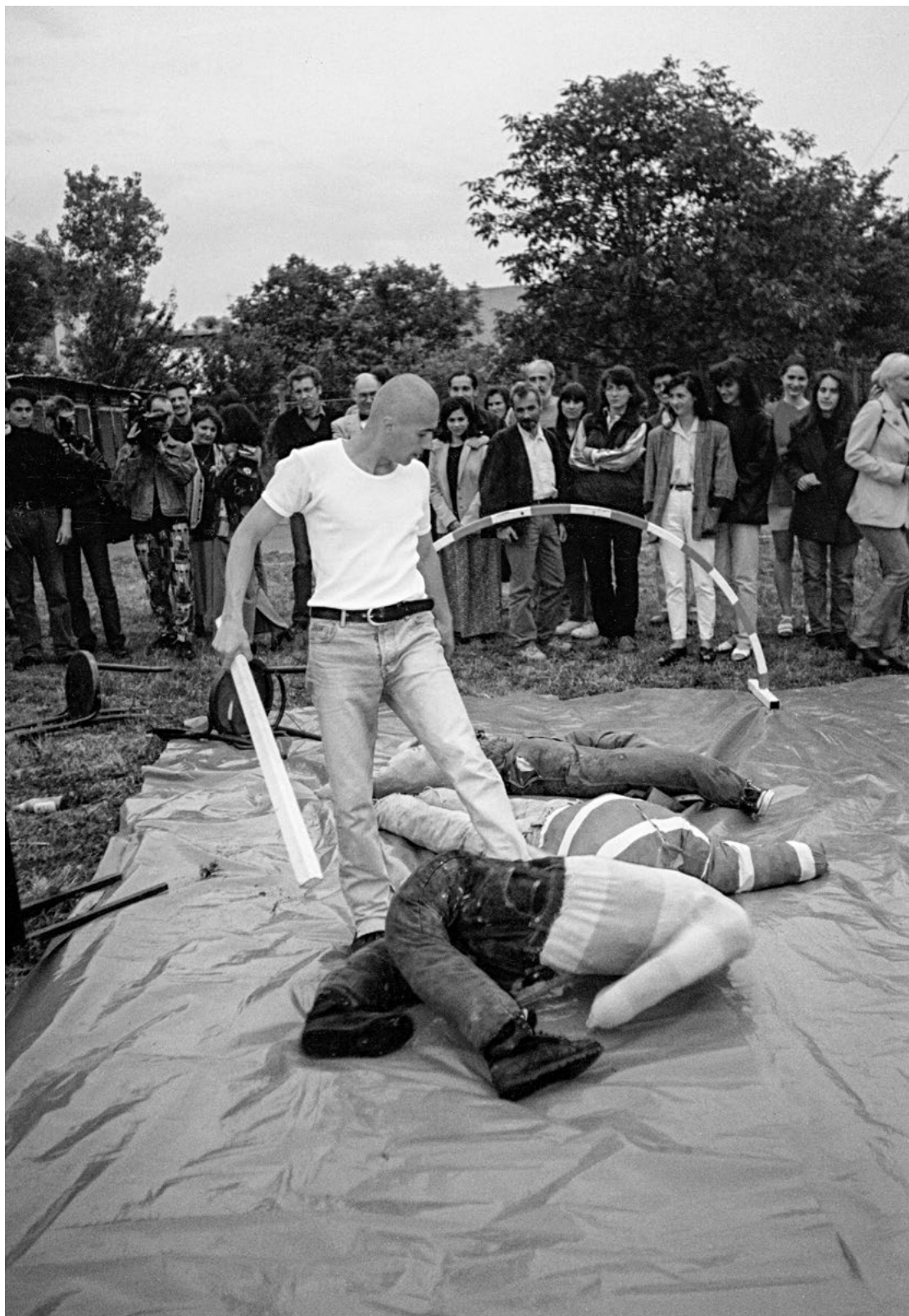
**Figure 1:**  
**From the Institution-Artist and Farther**

A relevant case study for the tendency of self-institutionalization expressed by various artistic projects and forms of collaboration is represented by the Periferic project in Iași, initiated by artist Matei Bejenaru in 1997 as a performance festival and subsequently as an international biennial of contemporary art. To me, the case appears to be universally relevant and provides a good basis for an analysis of how a project of this kind has transformed, from an individual commitment of an artist in the local context into a self-organized structure (from 2001, Periferic has been managed by the VECTOR association, consisting of the group of artists associated with the biennial). I am using the somewhat hybrid term institution-artist to illustrate the figure of the artist characteristic of the 1990s who “wants to ‘reproduce’ projects of the metropolis and to legitimate [them]

4 — In a recent article, the Hungarian art historian Edit András has analyzed the position adopted by the East in the new critical theories and has underlined two important characteristics of the regional artistic physiognomy due to which the East has attracted the attention of the international discourse: on the one hand, it is the tendency to focus on a local product that “to be communicated, must still participate in the global public discourse and even if it has to do it from local positions”; on the other hand, as pointed out by the author, it is the fact that “by modifying and moving to the fore the concept of temporality, that is, the acceptance of the simultaneity of different temporalities, the understanding of the past and its analysis gain an extraordinary importance, but in terms of interpreting the present and its dilemmas, and by no means from the nostalgic desire to relive the past.” From: András, Edit, *The Ex-Eastern Bloc's Position in the New Critical Theories and in the Recent Curatorial Practice*, in: *IDEA arts+ society* 40 (2012) [see also excerpt reprinted in this volume].

5 — Term introduced in the preface in Raunig and Ray, op. cit., p. 19. “In fact, the very idea of a ‘project institution’ is glaringly contradictory. For if the concept of ‘institution’ implies a desire for long-term duration, continuity and security, the concept of ‘project’ by contrast implies limited duration and the negative effects, such as precarization and insecurity, associated with it.” In the same direction, Nina Möntmann introduces the term “quasi-institutional”, as a result of her examination of the activities generated by the meetings taking place between artists, curators, theorists or activists. In: Möntmann, op. cit., p. 158.

6 — Nowotny, Stefan, “Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique,” in: Raunig and Ray, op. cit., p. 26.



Vlad Horodincă. *Performance #2*. 1997. Performance, Periferic Performance Festival, French Cultural Center, Iasi, Romania. Courtesy the artist

within contemporary art's global system of validation and hierarchic differentiation."<sup>7</sup> In the context of the postcommunist transition period, Periferic has basically been a dream of getting a marginal artistic context closer to the centre. Examining in retrospect the activity of the VECTOR group, after the completion of the Periferic biennale in 2008, we notice how the original dream has lost its quality of regulatory norm and a new dream has been conceived: "We decided that we had to be something else and act differently. We had to be ourselves. We didn't have to be enrolled into one agenda or another, but we did have to have a little bit of power, and this power came from a network of institutions and people that we collaborated with. This was what I was dreaming of."<sup>8</sup>

The VECTOR practice is primarily a practice-in-context, an effort of organization that tends to be a collective product aware of its local role, which operates in a wide range of registers: from gallery to forms of involvement in the public space, from editorial production to the organization of residencies, from the archive as a material concept to the establishment of regional networks (interest in peripheral spaces such as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Lebanon or Egypt) or international networks (European Network for Public Art Producers). Still, beyond the specific activity carried out locally and the constant interest of the group in researching the conditions of artistic production in the region, the VECTOR case is indicative of a vivid reality of the Romanian artistic scene: first, the feeling that these self-organized artistic initiatives need to be urgently legitimized inside the social and cultural context in which they operate and caused to exit the semi-public sphere where they currently are; second, the need to acknowledge once again that cultural production in the form of projects is the main sustainable modality to open the field of "knowledge of action" and offer a different view on social reality; and, last but not least, the general sensation of tiredness, due to the precariousness of their existence (i.e., insufficient financing). Right now, VECTOR has moved towards an area of co-existence with the academic environment (through a collaboration with the

George Enescu University of Arts in Iași), with the intention of undertaking several projects of artistic research in the field of critique.

A similar example of self-institutionalization is that of the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Institute, founded by Slovenian artist Tadej Pogačar in 1998. The P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Institute is a non-profit cultural institution that currently operates the Center in Galerija P74 and the KAPSULA bookshop/project space in Ljubljana. The origins of the institute are to be found in the series of works achieved in the 1990s by Pogačar entitled Museum of Contemporary Art, a virtual museum that was subsequently renamed P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of Contemporary Art (PMCA). PMCA critically reflects on the rigid institutional framework of museums/art institutions and proposes a symbolic deconstruction of the centres of power through the identification of alternative models and networks, invoking a new principle, i.e., parasitism. To return to the activity of the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Institute, it is remarkable how Pogačar developed this project individually and contributed to the connection of the various agencies and regional artistic practices. The revitalization of the editorial segment—the artist's book—engages specific modalities of critical reconstruction of a regional history by researching the recent past through the agency of the publications edited by artists starting from the 1960s in Slovenia and Eastern Europe. The series of artists' books and editions, as well as the establishment of a collection of artists' books, are an intelligent manner of exploiting an artistic practice started in the 1960s in Slovenia by the OHO group and of following up on it.

### Figure 2: Collective Forms of Production

If we follow the trajectory of the project-institution, we notice how the East's rising critical thinking and wish to revive critical theory came to the forefront in the early 2000s. A lucid discourse directed towards the area of interference between art politics and the hard theory is being practiced by two well-known curatorial collectives: What, How & for Whom (WHW) (Zagreb, Croatia) and TkH (Walking Theory) (Belgrade, Serbia). The interest of these platforms—in the imaginary of postcommunist modernity, in assessing the individual experience in the light of the "naturalization" of neoliberalism, in the rhetoric of normalization and the indirect violence generated in the public space by the new forms of social coercion—reconfirm the wish of the independent artistic milieu to transgress

7 — Bejenaru, Matei, "A Conversation Between Kristina Lee Podessa, Matei Bejenaru and Livia Panu," in: *Filip 14* (2011), <http://www.mateibejenaru.net/c.html> (accessed on December 20, 2013).

8 — Ibid.

the boundaries of its own discipline. Also, these initiatives externalize a common effort of answering a number of current uncertainties in relation to artistic autonomy, public instrumentalization of art or the social efficiency of progressist thinking. The last project of the WHW collective, the *Dear Art* exhibition, was showcased at the Avtonomni Kulturni Center Metelkova, Ljubljana, in 2012 and adapted in 2013 for Calvert 22 gallery in London. The exhibition powerfully voiced the main issues on which the What, How & for Whom collective has focused ever since its establishment in 1999, modulating its critical discourse and expressing its own doubts. Analyzing the current status of the cultural institution in the context of the massive budget cuts in culture and education and reconfirming the marginality of critical artistic practices in the current economics of art, but also the enthusiasm of its protagonists, *Dear Art* “attempts to ask some necessary questions: why do we still need art, and what is it that we expect to get from art today? What is its promise, and what do we promise it in return? And what happens when this promise is broken, betrayed, or just plain exhausted?”<sup>9</sup>

The practice of WHW highlights once again the importance of the particular position from which art asserts itself and acts in the public sphere—meaning that art becomes a performative edifice permanently activated by the state of the present. The same set of ideas animates the TkH collective,<sup>10</sup> a research and education platform for theoretical-artistic activism initiated by a group of artists and theorists belonging to various disciplines (mainly the performing arts). However, it is not the exhibition practice that defines the group. Highlighting the fact that theory is always a social practice, TkH explores “the potentialities of performance as a new scientific/theoretical paradigm,” and the outcome is a collective production space that functions according to the model of the open institution where (self-)education and theoretical production are acquired through dialogue and transfer of information/

knowledge. Projects such as *illegal\_cinema* (constantly organized since 2010 at Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, France) or *Deschooling Classroom* (2009–11) involve a non-formal educational format devoid of hierarchical relations between teacher and disciple, providing alternatives to the official education system. The “public lessons” are cross-disciplinary spaces of reflection and collective responsibility, where theory is performed freely in order to give rise to new methodologies and forms of knowledge.

### Figure 3: The Institution as a Network

However different the genealogies of these self-organized structures may be, the return to a research-based practice, the substantial attention paid to the past and to the retrieval, at a local level, of the artistic and cultural phenomenon after the Second World War may be deemed constant features of the new institutional practices in the region. The investigation of the past through the eyes of the present reflects a desire to establish a new relationship with oneself, functioning as a reaction to the precarious conditions of contemporaneity and as a horizon of expectations. The activity of the autonomous network of tranzit organizations, present in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, has been an exercise of reflection from this standpoint. Defined as a trans-national, non-hierarchical network, which has set out to enhance local artistic narrations by making them participate in the regional and international histories and realities, tranzit dedicates itself to liberating the regional theoretical discourse from the old preconceptions and commonplaces. By eroding<sup>11</sup> the canonized meta-interpretations of Eastern European art and legitimizing new theoretical and curatorial concepts in order to inspire new readings, the projects of tranzit,<sup>12</sup> whether they are produced by a single local office or in collaboration with the other members of the network, complete the puzzle of the cultural history of the region.

9 — In the *Dear Art* catalogue, eds. What, How & for Whom (WHW) and Calvert 22 Foundation: London 2013, p. 12. WHW consists of curators Ivet Čurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović, and designer and publicist Dejan Kršić.

10 — *TkH* was established by Ana Vujanović, Bojan Djordjević, Siniša Ilić, Jelena Novak, Ksenija Stevanović, Bojana Cvejić, Jasna Veličković, and the professor of aesthetics and art theory Miško Šuvaković in Belgrade in 2000. More information on the activity of the group may be found in the text published by Ana Vujanović and Bojan Djordjević: <http://arte-a.org/en/node/203> (accessed on August 18, 2014).

11 — “Tranzit generates deep experience in the local artistic and intellectual biotopes in relation with continuity, a reassessment of contemporary history (arising chiefly from the artistic catharsis of the 1960s and ’70s) and in challenging

the canons, geographies and master narratives of postwar European (art) histories.” <http://www.tranzit.org/en/about/> (accessed on August 18, 2014).

12 — I would like to mention here projects such as *Monument to Transformation*; *The Julius Koller Society*; *Sweet Sixties: Avant-Gardes in the Shadows of the Cold War*; *The Free School for Art Theory and Practice*; and *Mutually: Archives of Non-Institutionalized Culture of the 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovakia*.

All this game of choice, practised by the independent artistic sector in Eastern Europe, implies a desire to articulate the issues of the present time in its own terms and awareness with respect to the fragility of the past, which has to be conquered again and again in order to gain meaning. Without intending to draw a conclusion to my notes, I might, nevertheless, mention that the most important feature of these project-institutions is their pushing to the background the art institution as it was defined in the 1990s, and their choosing to highlight instead the network of active relations between artists, theorists, curators, policymakers and experts in an attempt to approach differently

the production of art and its position in the public space (which also involves addressing a specific public). “This new institution of organized collaborations could serve then as an information pool, a hub for various trans-disciplinary forms of collaboration, in legal matters as a union, and as an entry for audiences to participate locally and exchange internationally.”<sup>13</sup>

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13 — Möntmann, op. cit., p. 158.

## Artivism

ALDO MILOHNIĆ

At the beginning of the new millennium, political activism in Slovenia gained strength. Following some smaller actions, in February 2001 a group of activists who gave themselves an ironic and enigmatic name, Urad za intervencije (Intervention Office), usually shortened to UZI, organized a protest in support of refugees. Among the events that followed, especially worthy of mention is a protest staged on the occasion of the meeting between Presidents Bush and Putin in Slovenia, which will be remembered for the enormous number of police officers and technical equipment engaged in securing this gathering. Although UZI later quietly disappeared, the protests continued (e.g., against the war in Iraq, in support of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and so on), only activist groups now operated under different names. One such group (or formation, or platform) was Dost je! (It's Enough!), which proved especially successful in organizing protests and actions in support of the “erased” residents of Slovenia.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, we will take a closer look

at two actions related to this issue: one was called *Združeno listje* (*United Leaves*) and carried out at the party headquarters of ZLSD (Social Democrats); the other, called *Erasure*, took place outside the main entrance to the Slovenian parliament.

The direct action *United Leaves*—a “blitzkrieg occupation” of the headquarters of the ZLSD party—took place on October 7, 2003. A group of activists dressed in white coveralls managed to persuade the party's front-desk clerk to open the door, and once inside they dispersed throughout the building, littering it with dead autumn leaves. The white coveralls then left the ZLSD premises and issued a press release. In it they announced similar surprise actions for other parties but then decided to surprise all the (parliamentary) parties at one time. On the next day (October 8, 2003), they staged another action in front of the parliament building. This time the activists, again dressed in white coveralls and appearing in a group of similar size, occupied the street in front of the building and lay down on the road, arranging their bodies in the shape of the word “erasure.” The activists lying on the road were protected from both sides by fellow activists, who blocked the passage of cars by holding a banner bearing the legend “No stopping” and the message “Drive on! We Don't Exist.” Before the activists left the scene they delineated the shapes of

1 — The “erased” is a term used in Slovenia for almost 30,000 people who lost their status as permanent residents soon after Slovenia gained independence. They were “erased” from the register of permanent residents. The case is considered by many national and international human rights organizations as the most blatant and massive violation of human rights in the short history of Slovenia as an independent state. For a detailed analysis of this problem, see Jasminka Dedić, Vlasta Jalušić and Jelka Zorn. *The Erased: Organized Innocence and the Politics of Exclusion*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2003.

their bodies on the asphalt with a spray can, so when they dispersed, a vast graffiti on the road continued to attract the attention of passersby and, especially, the deputies to the National Assembly.

The purpose of both actions was explicitly political in nature: to draw attention to the problem of erased residents, to demonstrate solidarity with people whose human rights had been violated, and to increase pressure on the political elite to implement the decision of the Constitutional Court regarding the erased residents. In both cases, the political messages were conveyed in the style of the tradition of autonomous movements that stems from the concept of the use of one's own body as a means of direct political action. The activists were dressed in white coveralls which, indeed, had a practical function (they protected their bodies from dirt, made the writing more contrasting, and made more difficult the work of the police should they try to identify the participants on the basis of television or video footage, photos, etc.). On the other hand, the white coveralls were also costumes of a special kind, such as may be attributed meaning depending on the needs dictated by a concrete situation.<sup>2</sup>

### Action Corpography

In these actions there is a metaphoric/metonymic use of language and concepts that rely on word play. "United leaves" (*Združeno listje* in Slovene) echoes "United List" (*Združena lista* in Slovene; the full name is the United List of Social Democrats, abbreviated to ZLSD). An important detail one should know is that the then-Minister of the Interior, Rado Bohinc, came from the ranks of the ZLSD, meaning that the party was effectively tailoring the strategy for the resolution of the erasure issue. The main requisite used in this action—dead autumn leaves—could be understood as a message to the party saying that its policy was futile (dry, without growth potential, something discarded), and that it would be blown away from the political stage unless it changed its policy (in the same way the autumn wind blows away dead leaves).

The second action is a unique visual performance of my concept of "gestic performative."<sup>3</sup> In conceptualizing this notion, I relied on Quintilian's "textbook of rhetoric," *Institutio Oratoria*. In Book II, Chapter 3 ("Delivery, Gesture and Dress") Quintilian writes: "Delivery [*pronuntiatio*] is often styled action [*actio*]. But the first name is derived from the voice, the second from the gesture [*gestus*]. For Cicero in one passage speaks of action as being a form of speech, and in another as being a kind of physical eloquence. Nonetheless, he divides action into two elements, which are the same as the elements of delivery—namely, voice and movement. Therefore, it matters not which term we employ."<sup>4</sup> The *Erasure* was structured as a gestic performative, which inseparably connects gesture and utterance (delivery), or the body and the signifier, into Cicero's and Quintilian's physical eloquence/elocution.

If the classic (Austin's) definition of performative utterances says that "to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it,"<sup>5</sup> a gestic performative can be said to represent an attempt to extend the speech act to the domain of the visual, i.e., physical and bodily act, graphic act, gesture, etc., in short, non-verbal yet still performative acts. Such a physical act has every appearance of a speech act: through their materiality, the activists' bodies, which originally operate within the area of action (*actio*), now literally *incorporate* (embody) the utterance and thus enter the domain of delivery (*pronuntiatio*), in a non-verbal but eloquent manner. This activists' *corpography* produces a metaphorical condensation: the performative aspect of the utterance "erasure" is the act of drawing it out, or, to put it differently, the performative erasure is uttered by way of drawing it out. As in the classic performative, where "utterance is neither truthful nor untruthful," we could extend this assertion by para-phrasing Austin and say that to delineate the erasure (in the appropriate circumstances, i.e., in direct action)

2 — For example, in the protests against the war in Iraq, "white overalls symbolised Bush's innocent victims, and the added red colour stood for the blood spilled in the territories of the former Babylon through the use of the sophisticated military technology of the West" (*Mladina*, October 13, 2003). In the context of the *United Leaves* action, white coveralls symbolized the "void that was created with the erasure of thousands of people, reminding us of a white trace across a drawing left behind by an eraser." The whiteness of their costumes was thus intended to recall people "missing from society" (*Delo*, October 8, 2003).

3 — See my texts "Performative Theatre: Speech Acts Theory and Performing Arts" in: Aldo Milohnić and Rastko Močnik (eds.),

*Along the Margins of Humanities*. Ljubljana: ISH, 1996, pp. 237–253, and "Gestic Theatre," *Maska*, nos. 1–2, Winter 1999, pp. 61–64.

4 — Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book II, Chapter 3 ("Delivery, Gesture and Dress").

5 — John L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. London-Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 6.





Dost je! (It's Enough!). *Izbris* (Erasure). October 8, 2003.  
Public action in front of the Slovenian parliament building, Ljubljana

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is not to *describe* their doing of what they should be said in so delineating to be doing in order to produce a *corpographic* image of the erasure (and thus utter it), but it is to do it. What we actually witness is the delineation of erasure, or better said, we witness **del(in)e(a)tion**.

The material evidence or, conditionally speaking, the perlocutionary aspect of this *corpographic* (gestic and performative) act was the spraying of the utterance on asphalt, which became visible only when the activists left the scene. The side effect, or the implicit, symbolic effect, of the action was thus the secondary, graphic inscription on asphalt, which could be interpreted as a demand for reentering (or, poetically, reinscribing) the erased into the register of permanent residents. The absurdity of the situation of the thousands of residents of Slovenia whom bureaucratic reasoning turned into dead souls was ironically depicted by means of a banner urging drivers to drive on without paying attention to what was happening, because the protagonists of the event “do not exist.” In other words (in the jargon of contemporary performance theory),<sup>6</sup> by toying with an implicit metaphor about dead souls, the activists were able to denote performance as non-performance (afformance): if key protagonists in an event “do not exist,” then it would be possible to say that the event as such does not exist either. Yet, since a characteristic of a performative act is that an utterance is neither truthful nor untruthful, we should start from the hypothesis that on the descriptive-perceptive level this does not have direct consequences for the materiality of the act. The statement “we do not exist” on the descriptive level indeed contradicts the coinciding *corpographic* act occurring at the same place (the graphic delineation of the utterance “erasure” using bodies), but the performative nature of this “constructed situation” creates a situation in which the act, by virtue of its existence alone, creates the conditions that enable its own negation or, in other words, provides the constellation in which a non-event becomes an event. Since this dimension is intuitively perceived, one will ascribe ironic meaning to the utterance “we do not exist,” and it will be immediately understood as an intentional contradiction that additionally highlights the absurdity of the

situation of the “erased,” while simultaneously providing the key to understanding the event.

Crucial for *Erasure* and similar actions is the use of the body, which is no longer representative but constitutive, to paraphrase Hardt and Negri, and as such it is embedded in modern resistance practices.<sup>7</sup> We have seen similar *corpographic* engagements of the body in the past,<sup>8</sup> especially in performance art and in live or action painting, as well as in recent political initiatives.<sup>9</sup> The activist who took part in the *Erasure* guerrilla performance is like Brecht’s spontaneous “actor” from a street scene, a chance witness to a road accident now explaining to curious individuals and passersby what has happened. This presenter is not a professional actor, and his reconstruction of the road accident is not an artistic event, but despite this, says Brecht, this hypothetical dilettante has a certain creative potential. In short, an activist is not an artist, but he/she is still not without a “knack for art”; an activist is an artist as much as is inevitable, no more and no less; the artisanship is a side effect of a political act. Precisely this constitutes the *artist*’s (artist and activist) specific gravity, uniqueness and significance. The absence of concerns about aesthetics and a disrespectful attitude towards grand narratives (political, legal, social, perhaps even philosophical), relegates an *artist* to the structural place of an amateur actor, that is to say, an actor who appears strange to the “silent majority,” but precisely because of this he/she is in a position to pose important questions about issues that are not challenged otherwise, since they are somehow taken for granted.

[...]

### Security Panic and Artistic Immunity

Besides these and many other direct actions, there are some projects that might be called “socio-artistic diversions.”<sup>10</sup> Recently, paradigmatic examples of these art projects in Slovenia

7 — See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000, concluding section (“Activist”).

8 — For example, in those variants that, in addition to using the body as “a tool for drawing,” i.e., as a substitute for a paint brush (e.g., live paintings by Yves Klein), also use the body as a drawing surface (e.g., living sculptures by Piero Manzoni, Günter Brus’s painting of his own body, Marina Abramović’s skin incisions of political symbols, etc.).

9 — Such as, for example, the project entitled *Baring Witness*. The initiators of this project were American artists Donna Sheehan and Paul Refell, who invited volunteers, especially women volunteers, to write out various political messages using their mainly naked bodies. See [www.baringwitness.org](http://www.baringwitness.org) (last accessed on October 25, 2004).

10 — A descriptive concept proposed by Tanja Lesničar Pučko; see her article “Waddssassination of the Church, or the Limitations of the Artistic Church Credo?,” *Maska*, Ljubljana, 2005, vol. XX, nos. 1–2 (90–91), pp. 30–33.

6 — See Werner Hamacher. “Afformativ, Streik” in: C. L. Hart Nibbrig (ed.). *Was heißt “Darstellen”?*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994, pp. 340–371, and Hans-Thies Lehmann. *Postdramatisches Theater*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 2001 (2nd edition), pp. 459–461.

were the “soft terrorist” actions by Marko Breclj, the *Burning Cross* action in Strunjan by Dean Verzel and Goran Bertok, some installations and performances at the Break Festival, and so on. In these artistic actions, installations are never simply installations, artistic actions are never solely artistic, but they nevertheless produce an obvious aesthetic effect; the authors indeed operate within the institution of art, but at the same time their attitude towards it is careless, and the purity of the genre is not an issue for them; some among them, in Slovenia especially Marko Breclj, incessantly cross over from one field to another. What is important for these types of artistic actions, which among other things produce the effect of moral panic, is to preserve their relatively autonomous position with respect to the system of art, where the majority of these actions are still domiciled, and with respect to the wider social and political field. The transversality of these practices and their hybrid nature enable quick passages from the predominantly artistic into the predominantly political sphere and back. In combination with creative protest events, this creates a kind of post-Fluxus atmosphere of relative emancipation through experimental practice.<sup>11</sup>

[...]

If artists are ordered to pay compensation because of damage, they are equated with any other citizen: a fine or compensation must be paid, otherwise they go to prison. However, attempts by some influential persons to punish artists by renouncing their right to receive money from public funds for their projects mainly amounted to no more than political pressure. So far, legal actions were the favourite option of ecclesiastical circles, young sections of Christian-oriented political parties and certain individuals who took it as their mission to legally “protect” Christian symbols from presumed “abuses.” Yet, this is not an easy task in Slovenia, given that the Penal Code prohibits the defacing of state symbols but not of religious symbols. In addition, artists enjoy special immunity as regards the use of symbols for artistic purposes. This immunity is accorded to them by Article 59 of the Constitution (“The freedom of scientific and artistic endeavour

shall be guaranteed”). When one remembers that this is supplemented with the provision in Article 39 that guarantees “[f]reedom of expression of thought, freedom of speech and public appearance, of the press and other forms of public communication and expression” and Article 169 of the Penal Code, which stipulates that insults are actionable but art is exempt under certain conditions, it becomes clear that in a modern liberal state the institution of art has managed to obtain for itself a unique immunity. Viewed from a sufficiently abstract perspective, it is even comparable to the immunity accorded to the deputies to the National Assembly and judges. Without this protection, Marko Breclj could have ended up in court for “obstructing a religious ceremony,” Dean Verzel and Goran Bertok could have been sued for starting a fire, and the activists partaking in the *Erasure* action could have ended up in court because by “mounting obstacles on the traffic road” they “endangered people’s lives.”<sup>12</sup>

However, several examples following the protests in Genoa and the 9/11 attacks showed that at certain moments (or even during longer periods), when the system is overwhelmed by “security panic,” its absorption potential becomes dangerously reduced, creating conditions for repressive restrictions on artistic freedoms and “expression of thought, freedom of speech and public appearance,” to use the language of the Slovenian Constitution. The most recent example of such a hysterical reaction of the government has been the legal action against American artist Steve Kurtz, accused of bioterrorism. Kurtz is a member of the popular artistic-activist collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). This process raised suspicions that it was an attempt by the government to silence the artist who was, with his scientist colleague Robert Ferrell, engaged in projects aimed at educating the general population about issues such as genetically modified foods and the interest of capital and the military establishment in subordinating and controlling biotechnical research.<sup>13</sup> Another outstanding example was the arrest of the Austrian artistic/activist group with international membership known as VolksTheater Karawane. In the histrionic manner of a travelling theatre, this group passed through Hungary and Slovenia on its way to Italy, where it participated in the

11 — “Fluxus is an emancipatory project because it endeavours to achieve individual and social changes that are realized through the aesthetization of everyday life and de-aesthetization of art.

Fluxus engages artists, non-artists, anti-artists, engaged and apolitical artists, poets writing non-poetry, non-dancers who dance, actors and non-actors, musicians, non-musicians and anti-musicians.” (Miško Šuvaković. *Paragrami tela/figure*. Belgrade: CENPI, 2001, p. 41.)

12 — Articles 314, 317 and 327 of the Penal Code.

13 — A lecture on this case was delivered by Claire Pentecost and Brian Holmes on September 4, 2004, in Ljubljana.

“alter-globalist” protests in Genoa. After their brutal arrest, the requisites and costumes they carried with them were described by the prosecutor as objects brought in order to be used for terrorist purposes. As a result, and quite incomprehensibly, children’s toys were turned into dangerous weapons, protective helmets used in sports were declared military equipment, a model of the Trojan Horse was described as a hiding place for “weapons” and so on.<sup>14</sup>

Given the general pressure of “security conscious” political forces to reduce the existing standards protecting human rights and freedoms, the question that arises is whether art is destined to assume again the function of an asylum for critical political operations, as it did many times in history. Will the increasingly widespread *artivism* combined with security

delirium eventually bring Western societies to the point at which there will be a critical mass of madness that would produce demands for the prohibition of the “abuse” of art for political operation? Something similar has occurred with the asylum system that was presumably abused by so-called economic emigrants to gain easier access to the labour markets of developed countries. Will politicians, state administrations, courts and the police one day speak of “manifestly unfounded artistic projects” as they now speak of “manifestly unfounded asylum applications,” a qualification that leads to a prompt refusal to grant asylum? In such a case, the creators of such artistic projects would lose the protection now guaranteed by the mechanisms protecting artistic freedom. In a modern liberal state, art is part of that corpus, so every violation of any human right, and especially the type of violation that is attempted by amending a constitution and legislation, by manipulating referendum mechanisms or the like, is eventually also aimed at artistic creativity. How can artists know that they are not the next in line? And how can they be confident that if this happens there will still be someone left who would be willing to stand up for freedom of artistic expression?

Excerpted from *transversal – eipcp multilingual webjournal* (March 2005). Translated by Olga Vuković.

14 — See Gini Müller. “Transversal oder Terror?” in: Gerald Raunig (ed.). *Transversal – Kunst und Globalisierungskritik*. Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2003, pp. 129–138. An interesting observation was contributed by Jürgen Schmidt, a collaborator of the VolksTheater Karawane group, in which he describes the hybrid, border situation of their group in relation to politics and art: “With its method the Caravan broke the dichotomy between art and politics; it seemingly took the position between both chairs while it was sceptically observed by both sides. Although within the field of art it was criticized as ‘activist autonomist,’ and within the field of political activism it was presented as ‘stupid artists,’ the Caravan always endeavoured to thwart this dominant logic.” (Jürgen Schmidt. “another war is possible // volXtheater” in: Gerald Raunig [ed.]. *Bildräume und Raumbilder – Repräsentationskritik in Film und Aktivismus*. Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2004, p. 101.)

## Art and Antagonism, Here and Now

OLEKSIY RADYNSKI

Antagonisms, clashes and tensions in the field of art and culture often attract significant public attention. This interest takes various forms—from yellow press coverage to analytical reports on “cultural politics.” What usually goes unnoticed from this perspective is the structural role that art and culture play in the ongoing social antagonisms at large. How do internal conflicts in the art field relate to the current social order? Which sides do the actors in the art field take within the social antagonism? Is the art field doomed to take sides in the already-defined social agenda, or is it able to impose its own agenda on the society at large? To answer these questions, it is necessary to define the

nature of the social antagonism, which is going on here and now.

### Brief Ideological Introduction

Is it possible to define the cultural, political and social field of Ukraine in one single word? The most common one-term description that brings together the disparate elements of the atomized Ukrainian society is the adjective “post-Soviet.” This shortcut is as justified as it is misleading, since it describes the current reality through the experience of the bygone time. The term “post-Soviet” is obviously a euphemism, a way to avoid a direct look at the basic conditions of present life through the reference to the past.

There is an alternative. Replace the prefix “post-” with a prefix that does not refer to a thing of the past. Replace the word “Soviet” with the name of the social order that *de facto* took over the “real existing socialism.” You will get a precise description of the world around us, which is “neo-capitalist.” Simply put, neo-capitalism is a revisionist social order aimed at the restoration of market economy at any price and its introduction into all spheres of private and social life—a kind of revenge on the Soviet economic order, which functioned outside the conventions of the market.

The notion of “restoration” is crucial here. Restorations of numerous political regimes, which were abolished by various revolutions, have often far exceeded their objects of restoration in viciousness and brutality. In a similar way, the restoration of capitalism in the post-Soviet context often took forms that are unprecedented in most of the capitalist world. The “shock therapy” of the early 1990s, the subsequent impoverishment and degradation of citizens, institutions and infrastructure, and the totalizing implementation of social Darwinism all represented the symptoms of contemporary capitalist ideology at its extreme. The story of post-Soviet “social transformation” proves that ideas are able to change societies no worse than bombs or other traditional means of warfare.

What does it all mean for the field of art? Are art and culture able to play a significant role in a neo-capitalist society dominated by market relations? Are they able to take sides in the social antagonisms that are being sharpened by the everlasting advance of post-Soviet neo-capitalism?

### Culture of Neo-Capitalism

It is well known that the ideology of capitalism works through self-concealment rather than self-exposure. It fashions itself as a non-ideology, as a normal, natural way of social coexistence. Nowhere does it conceal itself so efficiently as in the sphere where ideas and ideologies originate—that is, in the sphere of culture.

The fact that there is no such term as Capitalist Realism<sup>1</sup> does not mean that it doesn’t actually exist, exerting a social influence that

proves to be much more effective than Socialist Realism’s true influence upon its consumers. It’s true that institutions of culture and the modes of artistic production originating from the Socialist Realist legacy have remained relatively strong throughout the last two decades. But their real function has been diminished to mere self-preservation and physical survival of their representatives. Bigger parts of the miniscule state budget assigned to cultural funding are directed at nominal self-serving activities, most of which are usually corrupt. The state-supported cultural apparatus made a deal with the powers that be: it provides the state with the simulacrum of the “national culture” in exchange for laughable funding that allows for the “life minimum.”

The truly significant agents in the cultural field in Ukraine are thus to be found elsewhere. Those are the institutions promoting the discourse of contemporary art, a term that, with a certain degree of exaggeration, could be used as a label for discursively nonexistent “Capitalist Realism.” For the better part of the last decades, these institutions—from NGOs to private galleries—were relatively marginal, invisible and underfunded. Recently, the situation has changed dramatically, with the discourse of contemporary art entering the mass media, proliferating in numerous institutions (both private and public) and even infiltrating the state-funded “national projects.” It should be acknowledged that the discourse of contemporary art is coming close to establishing its own hegemony in the cultural field. This hegemony would mean the arrival of Capitalist Realism as a dominant cultural form of the neo-capitalist regime, formerly known as “post-Soviet.”

Unlike its infamous predecessor, Capitalist Realism seemingly does not impose any formal or discursive restrictions upon the field of art. Its agenda is—on the contrary—“anything goes.” All forms of artistic and creative expression are permitted, as long as they do not violate the law and, most significantly, are able to raise funds for self-sustainment. Art, therefore, is subjected either to the rules of market economy or to the guidelines of cultural funding that represent the ongoing political agenda of neo-capitalism.

In fact, the discourse of Capitalist Realism equates the figure of the contemporary artist with that of a private entrepreneur: you can do your own business, but you have to pay the taxes—or evade them in one of the numerous ways provided by the capital-dominated

1 — Author’s note from 2017: At the time of writing, the work of Mark Fisher on “Capitalist Realism” was largely absent from the critical discourse in Ukraine. Therefore, the use of this term in the present text does not in any way refer to Fisher’s thinking—which would undoubtedly make the ideas presented here more coherent.

legislation. In the case of contemporary artists, the metaphor of tax paying would mean conforming to one of the few subtle hints that guarantee cultural funding and are usually formulated in various application forms. Enhancing democratic thinking, citizen participation, collaborative practices, gender issues and various identitarian strategies are all very welcome. Evading taxes would then be represented through various strategies of playing around with the funding guidelines in order to be able to do your own work.

Let me be clear: I don't think that enhancing citizen participation, gender issues and democratic thinking by means of art is somehow wrong. The problem here is rather a structural one. What is the true role of contemporary art in this constellation, given that the state, which should be obliged to perform the same functions, in fact limits its activities to policing and law enforcement, while it degenerates the social ties between its citizens and ridicules participation and collaboration? What if we notice that the state is doing all that in total accordance with the same doctrine that feeds Capitalist Realism in the field of art? The answer to these questions is saddening. Art, in fact, is taking over some of the direct (and crucial) functions that the neo-capitalist regime refuses to perform. Thus, it implicitly takes this regime's side in the antagonisms that are ongoing in society. It is a servant of the regime of power, which is profoundly, structurally corrupt.

### **Art as a Tool of Repair**

A look at the discursive strategies imposed by contemporary art institutions upon the actors in the cultural field clarifies the details of this alliance. Art is entering the fields abandoned by the state in an attempt to repair the devastating effects of neo-capitalist policies and their impact upon social life.

One good example of this strategy is a widespread "community trend" in contemporary art. This is beyond doubt the most visible shift in significant Ukrainian art of the last decade. Artists and other cultural workers tend to create groups and communities in order to pursue collective rather than individual projects. More and more artistic practices are also engaged in work with non-artistic communities, where artists are fashioning themselves as a kind of social worker. The mere fact of several people getting together and doing something in common may be successfully represented as a socially engaged artistic project in itself.

Again, I don't claim there is anything wrong with using art as a way of community building. Again, it is rather the specific context of this practice that is questionable. Why did such a self-evident, universal practice as collective collaboration between humans suddenly become a value that should be enhanced and supported by all means, artistic work included? It seems that this practice stems from the destruction of social ties between citizens that characterizes the impact of neo-capitalism upon society. Individualist ethics are praised above all, and all collective endeavors are ridiculed as being contrary to the true spirit of "human nature." The idea that the interests of the self should indiscriminately prevail over the interests of community was quite forcefully installed into the minds of post-Soviet people. As a result, society virtually ceased to exist. The dream of Margaret Thatcher became true in Ukraine: there is no such thing as society here, there are only human "elementary particles" caring about their own interests. The social catastrophe that this state of affairs leads to is predictable, and art is called to repair the minor insufficiencies that will improve the image of this catastrophe in the eyes of the few.

### **Hatred Towards Art**

Being the servant of the powers that be is not the only role that art plays here and now. Even contained within the framework of neo-capitalist discourse, art's subversive capacities are a problem for certain forces within society. For quite a long period of time, art didn't provoke any reaction or backlash from the side of a largely conservative society. Its often brutal and provocative language was simply too outlandish for a society focused on its own survival. The situation changed in the 2000s, when art came under attack for not complying with the vision of national community that started to be implemented by state power, with an important backing from the church. Films started to be banned from cinemas, attempts to remove literary works from circulation were undertaken and, most visibly, art exhibitions were banned or shut down. If in the 1990s art could not in any way overcome the indifference of the public, in the 2000s the public finally started experiencing emotions towards art—and the most common one was hatred. By confronting this hatred and coming to terms with its consequences, art and its institutions have reconsidered their position within the social antagonism.

The peaceful coexistence of art with the institutions of state and church had transformed into the violent clashes of the “cultural wars.” This is best exemplified by the story of a place where the two sides of this antagonism were literally neighbors. In the 1990s, as part of a network of Eastern European Soros-funded art institutions, the Center for Contemporary Art was founded at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. The center had occupied the premises of an eighteenth-century Orthodox seminary school, sharing the building with a fully operating Orthodox church. Although the CCA had often exhibited examples of critical, radical and otherwise inconvenient art, neither the church nor the academy—the institutions of power par excellence—paid much attention to its practices. On the contrary, the status of the church itself was often put into question, since its operation within the higher educational establishment obviously countered Ukrainian law.

The situation changed when art-related activities started to interfere with the field of power institutions and to question their premises. In particular, the Visual Culture Research Center, a body that was founded by academics and activists and which inherited the space of the CCA, was dealing with matters external to art itself—like the politics of education or religious backlashes—using artistic means. This led to a violent response on the part of local authority, supported by the far-right groups that expressed their hatred towards art and art-related critical practices in the most telling and sometimes violent forms. As a result, the space that had become a symbol for the development of the current art scene was shut down and, in a reactionary gesture, turned into storage for the library of a nationalist historian known for his anti-Semitic publications.

The story of this clash is being played out at the moment, but on a much larger “national” scale. This is the case of Art Arsenal—the first cultural mega-project of the state that currently devotes itself to the development of contemporary art. In a sense, the inclusion of a contemporary art agenda into the area of state politics, exemplified by this institution, is a clear sign

of a shift in cultural hegemony and the establishment of Capitalist Realism as a leading principle of local art and culture. However, this vision clashes with the traditionalist and religious approaches towards cultural politics—and, as in the aforementioned case, this clash is epitomized by the physical proximity of Art Arsenal to church institutions. These institutions clearly feel threatened by the advance of contemporary art practices towards their walls, and this fear is being imposed upon the representatives of the state apparatus in charge of the institution. This resulted in probably the loudest controversy in recent art—the physical destruction of an artwork critical of the alliance between state and church by the institution’s chief. This ongoing controversy will define the debate over current art in the local context for years ahead.

### Art Strikes Back

The reconsideration of the role of art and its institutions as a result of recent “cultural wars” may lead to the major shift in art’s positioning in a current social antagonism. Rather than being a regime’s servant or an extravagant outsider, art is becoming a sovereign player in the social field. The institutions of art, in turn, come to an understanding of their implicit political significance—apart from being explicitly used as tools of political games or propaganda. The institutions of art and the artistic groups and communities that emerged from the agenda of contemporary art are able to subvert their prescribed function in neo-capitalist society, which is to heal the wounds of the devastated society or to serve as an expensive toy for those who perpetrate those wounds. Art institutions (private, public and those that transcend this divide) are able to provide shelter and a cover-up for the practices that aim at transforming society at large. This will allow art to reclaim the social role that it was stripped of—not to simulate reality but to form it.

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# A Parallel Slalom from BADco: In Search of a Poetics of Problems

BOJANA CVEJIĆ

This text is written with a double mission. By observing choreographic and dramaturgical ideas and methods in the performances of the Croatian collective BADco, I want to revive the importance of *poetics* in light of the predominance of *practice* in today's discourse on art. BADco is a performance collective founded in 2000 based in Zagreb, and its artistic core comprises three dancer-choreographers, two dramaturges, and a philosopher: Ivana Ivković, Ana Kreitmeyer, Tomislav Medak, Goran Sergej Pristaš, Nikolina Pristaš, and Zrinka Užbinec. As the dramaturge Goran Sergej Pristaš has argued, today we are witness to a transformation of artistic work into praxis whereby artistic labor is extended, atomized, and dispersed in a variety of activities in which the artist manifests his/her will. These purportedly free yet commodified activities are often presented under the paradigm of art as research and education: as lectures, workshops, encounters, methodological exchanges, residencies, and so on. These occur in a familiar rhythm of fragmentation that subsumes life under work, that is, within the all-encompassing term *artistic praxis*.<sup>1</sup> In such a regime of production, little time is left for the artist actually to engage with his/her art, Pristaš concludes. In his brief statement "In Praise of Laziness" (1993), the Croatian conceptualist Mladen Stilinović suggests that to engage in art making the artist must endorse (and perfect) laziness, in an emphatic annihilation of capitalist production and the institutional market.<sup>2</sup> Laziness emerges as a poetics for Stilinović (and for Kazimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp, both of whom he draws upon) or as a condition for poetics, understood as an engagement with the principles of production (*poiesis*).

According to Aristotle, *poiesis* is one of the three categories of human activity.<sup>3</sup> It is *poiētikai technai* that designates the art of making, forming, and composing, or production, in contrast to, on the one hand, *praktikai technai*, which refers to activity without an end or product, carried out for effect in public, hence, a performing art or an instantiation of the political life of citizens. On the other hand, poetics is also distinguished from *teoretikai technai*, which signifies investigation, or theory as opposed to practice. However, this distinction can barely hold any longer, as the term "practice" has broadened to such an extent that it incorporates both poetics and theory.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the discourse on artistic practice has cannibalized poetics, emptying it of thought concerning what the product of artistic activity is, what it means, and how its principles might become instruments for looking past art into society.

In order to explain what this double (artistic and political) articulation of poetics entails, as well as to situate the geocultural context in which BADco's work arises, I will briefly introduce a book I coedited with Goran Sergej Pristaš entitled *Parallel Slalom: A Lexicon of Non-Aligned Poetics*. The volume features essays on notions of poetics devised by Yugoslav artists and cultural workers—ideas and working principles that exceed the autonomy of art by also pointing to the political unconscious of a society (that of the former Yugoslavia, now under EU capitalist democracy, and then under socialism). One example would be Stilinović's "laziness," mentioned earlier; others would include the concept of "delay," or the misrecognition, from the viewpoint of the Western-centered conception of modernity, of art in Eastern

1 — Goran Sergej Pristaš, "Anti-Production of Art," *TkH* 23 (2016).

2 — Mladen Stilinović writes: "Artists from the East were lazy and poor because in the East, that entire system of insignificant factors did not exist. Therefore, they had enough time to concentrate on art and laziness. Even when they did produce art, they knew it was in vain, it was nothing." He concludes "In Praise of Laziness" with two quotes about work: "Work is a disease (Karl Marx). Work is a shame (Vlado Martek)," quoted in B. Cvejić and G. S. Pristaš, eds., *Parallel Slalom: A Lexicon of Non-Aligned Poetics* (Belgrade, 2013), 335–40.

3 — Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon (New York, 1941).

4 — "Agamben made an important point in this respect when he noticed that, in the modern Western world, all human doing began to be perceived as practice—but is now conceived as a productive activity. In this process, the meaning of praxis was not only broadened to such an extent that it became a general term for all human activities; it went through a complete transformation to the point that it started to signify a manifestation of the human being's will and vital impulse, along with the concrete effects thereof." B. Cvejić and A. Vujanović, *Public Sphere by Performance* (Berlin, 2012), 136.

Europe, or the concept of “radical amateurism,” which describes the artistic practice of taking the stance of the amateur who dares to ask disturbing, nonprofessional questions.

Two attributes characterize this kind of thought: parallelism and nonalignment. The latter refers to the nonaligned movement of states that were not formally aligned with either of the two major power blocs during the Cold War. Nonalignment suggests that neither the discourses of art in the grip of the Soviet socialist regime nor the postcolonialism of the West and its academic variants can adequately account for experimental performance practices in the former Yugoslavia. While much of the experimentation was probed in writing—forming, since the year 2000, a regional (post-Yugoslav) platform of performing arts magazines such as *Maska*, *Frakcija*, and *TkH/Walking Theory*—the artists’ pages that were supposed to present performance artists from the Yugoslav context remained “empty.” Due to a lack of infrastructure for producing performances, artists and theorists were more often able to “rehearse thought” than to maintain a performance praxis, a fact evidenced in the export of Eastern European theorists and dramaturges into the Western context. Additionally, the spirit of collectivity and self-organization in life and artistic production within the independent scenes of Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, and Skopje made the identification of experimental practice difficult or irrelevant. In the Yugoslav cultural legacy, authorship isn’t branded as personal cultic expression or assigned clearly to one discipline, medium, or genre. BADco’s practice as a self-organized collective, a “nameless association of authors” (the acronym “BAD” in BADco stands for *bezimeno autorsko društvo* in Croatian), entails the rotation of responsible roles for each single work according to the varying wishes and concerns of the participating artists, roles that then transform in the course of the working process, rather than following established competencies of the individuals involved.

Now, returning to parallelism, calling poetics as a kind of thought a “parallel slalom” is to use the metaphor of a sloping ride, indeed, of a downhill ski race, which underlines the swift parallel connections between artists’ conceptual imagination and their critical insights into history and its political unconscious. The registers of poetics, politics, and philosophy here run parallel and sometimes get short-circuited among the notions of this lexicon. Parallelism also implies a kind of thought that arises from

within, or close to, artistic practice in its productive rather than interpretive aspect. While today most art schools in Europe foster a procedural knowledge of art making, the poetical concepts in parallel slalom emphasize learning how to look *through* and *from* art rather than how to create it. Perhaps thinking of the political usefulness of art as a set of critical tools is a reflex from previous socialist times. Parallelism also accounts for the aesthetic similarity between Eastern and Western European performance practices, which has contributed to the perception of the Eastern as a *déjà vu*, as old-fashioned in the Western gaze, causing some misunderstanding and disenchantment in the West in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Boris Groys has explained that the misrecognition of Eastern “non-art” by critics in the West, who failed to recognize it as art, reveals the difference in the use of art, not in aesthetic categories of form and style.<sup>6</sup>

This difference in the aesthetic function of art is what we are going to observe in BADco’s choreographic poetics. In all of their performances, dancing abounds, but it doesn’t present itself alone, isolated in auratic purified expression.<sup>7</sup> Instead it appears where it isn’t expected, as an instrumental substitution of another activity (physical labor, social gestures, animal life). Alongside the dramaturges, the dancers in BADco compose movement from a choreographic analysis of a situation in which conceptual tensions and contradictions are explored. For instance, in *I poor and one 0*, the performance that discusses the mutations of labor in capitalism through cinematic modes of production, all performers in one scene perform the repetitive movements of workers on an assembly line, which, detached from the (absent) machines, become serial ornaments. This dance serves to reveal the rhythms of Taylorist choreography in Fordist factory production. Or, in Nikolina Pristaš’s solo, *SEMI-INTERPRETATIONS or how to explain contemporary dance to an undead hare*, all movements derive from the logic of parallel gestures on the horizontal and vertical axes of the body. The principle of parallelism, which renders movement “unnatural,” but not artificial

5 — Cf. Bojana Kunst, “The Politics of Affection and Easiness,” in Ovejić and Pristaš, *Parallel Slalom*, 341–51.

6 — Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

7 — I will focus on the following works (in chronological order of creation date): *Solo Me* (2002), *Fleshdance* (2004), *memories are made of this . . . performance notes* (2006), *Changes* (2007), *I poor and one 0* (2008), *SEMI-INTERPRETATIONS or how to explain contemporary dance to an undead hare* (2010), and *A Lesser Evil* (2014). Information about these works can be found on the BADco website, <http://badco.hr/works/>.

in a robotic sense, comes from Delsartism.<sup>8</sup> According to disciples, who recorded his teaching, François Delsarte condemned symmetrical parallel gestures: “Modern art makes the man walk with leg and arm parallel. Ancient art would have the leg opposed to the arm . . . The master condemned the parallel movement of the limbs in gesture, and recommended attitudes which he called *inverse*.”<sup>9</sup>

In a reversal of the contrapposto of the antique, Renaissance, and neoclassical manners, Nikolina Pristaš always composes two parts of the body in parallel directions simultaneously. For instance, arms in parallel move downward in a gesture of beating. This suggests (according to Delsartism) deliberateness, planning, and intentionality, all that should be avoided in elegant, stylized conduct.<sup>10</sup> The parallelism saturating Nikolina Pristaš’s dance appears “wrong”; the mechanism seems faulty. It is counterintuitive, dissonant, and unnatural because it inhibits movement’s flow. Her work reveals the unconscious of modern dance in a choreographic way. The features of this unconscious are the suppression of the character of bourgeois class-consciousness in movement and the contradiction between freedom of expression—which, on the one hand, is regarded as synonymous with free will and, on the other, is understood as intuitive, nonconscious, spontaneous—and involuntary expression, which might yet consciously exclude certain gestures. While Pristaš’s dance restores the connection with the bourgeois aestheticization of social behavior at the core of modern dance, it also unmasks the prevalent notion of autonomy as a system of normalizing the freedom of abstract expression by including “good” gestures—those messages of freedom—and excluding “bad” noises.

Paraphrasing Fredric Jameson’s concept of the political unconscious as the site of ideology’s contradiction, Marko Kostanić interprets this operation as the “choreographic unconscious”: “Articulating choreography as a structural moment of operation in other non-dance social fields not only casts a different light on those places from which it has been extracted, but also establishes a framework for different ways of writing the history of dance.”<sup>11</sup> In tweaking Taylorism into an ornamental series of dance gestures, or in emphasizing parallel motion, the political unconscious is objectified choreographically. In other words, movement is extracted from a situation as a choreographic object, which exposes the unconscious structure by which bodies are organized in space, in relation to technology and modes of representation.

### From Problems to Antibodies

A claim must be adjoined to our search for poetics here, namely, that the productive nature of creation isn’t rooted in the consolidation of professional knowledge or in the excellence of craft but in the expression of problems that upset received knowledge and conventional wisdom. I regard the expression of a problem as a method of creation by posing questions that differentiate terms and conditions under which the creation of a material object—as, for instance, the composition of a bodily movement—unfolds.<sup>12</sup> In Gilles Deleuze, problems are objects of “Ideas,” as they characterize the relationship between forms of thought and forms of sensibility as one of difference, rather than identity. Deleuze writes: “In so far as they are the objects of Ideas, problems belong on the side of events, affections, or accidents rather than that of theorematic essences.”<sup>13</sup> Problems in the sense proposed here offer an insight into a coextensive parallelism between thinking and the practices of making, performing, and attending a choreography. Thus, the parallelism accounts for the dual status of problems: they stem from the very process of creation, as they express the thought that guides the choreographer and the performer in her decisions; and the problems are also proposed by the performances, as they further provoke

8 — French opera singer and actor François Delsarte (1811–1871) devised a system of physical deportment, a taxonomy of behavioral gestures and signs that would regulate social self-presentation. Delsartism became hugely popular in the U.S., where a manual like Anna Morgan’s *An Hour with Delsarte* instructed readers on the attitudes of the head and of all parts of the body, especially the various expressions of the eyes, nose, and mouth, that should be carefully practiced before a mirror. “Most people consult their mirrors for the single purpose of seeing their attractiveness; we should study them for the purpose of seeing ourselves as others see us,” Morgan advises; *An Hour with Delsarte: A Study of Expression* (Boston, 1889), 97–98. As embodiments of the beginnings of hyperindividualist alienation today, individuals are obliged to become the first readers of their own bodily text in order to police the possibilities of their interpretation.

9 — Quoted from various authors in *Delsarte System of Oratory* (New York, 1893), available at Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12200/12200-h/12200-h.htm>.

10 — See various authors in Stacy C. Marsella et al., *An Exploration of Delsarte’s Structural Acting System*, 2006, available at USC Institute for Creative Technologies, Publications, <http://ict.usc.edu/publications.php>.

11 — Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London, 1981); Marko Kostanić, “The Choreographic Unconscious,” 2011. Available at BADco., Publications, <https://bezimeni.wordpress.com/texts/>.

12 — See Bojana Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in Contemporary Dance and Performance* (Basingstoke, 2015).

13 — Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London, 1994), 187.



spectators, who observe the work, to think beyond recognition.

In BADco's poetic vocabulary, problem posing is often referred to as "pulling a brake."<sup>14</sup> What could it mean to pull a brake during the creation of a performance but to stop to observe its (historical) conditions and terms, and to extract, objectify, or translate them into a problem, an unconscious that drives that structure? This operation shouldn't be mistaken for one of transparency, whereby a hidden truth is revealed. On the contrary, production by means of poetics renders the problem an opaque and thick object, including the connections it has with its environment. As Goran Sergej Pristaš writes in his "Exploded View of a Poetics": "The redness of the face isn't a sign of illness lurking somewhere beneath the surface; instead it is the explication of the illness itself—production of the manner in which the ill body works. Hence, these procedures have the purpose of dissipating the phantom of transparency by stressing the presence of the phantoms."<sup>15</sup>

One such phantom has preoccupied the choreography of BADco in almost all their performances: the idea of a kinetic flow of uninterrupted movement, the foundational fantasy of modern dance in the twentieth century. That movement should pour like a melody through a clean space has been an adage of considerable theoretical attention, in turn giving rise to sundry other tropes: the melancholy of disappearance and the ephemeral nature of corporeal presence in the fleeting moment, the unfathomable expression that eludes language, the virtuosity of elevation, and the effortless defiance of gravity.<sup>16</sup> All these might account for the prevalent notion of movement's fluency and fluidity. But we might also add that today "flow" connotes seamless operation that

turns a problematic territory into a continuous, unbroken, and smooth surface for capital's circulation.

Pulling a brake on the flow of bodily movement means to act counterintuitively, against the grain of the widespread "release technique" that has informed the Western notion of the democratic dancing body since the 1980s. In works by BADco, to disrupt the release and flow of dancing is to generate motion from "intentionally imposed obstructions."<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, observed from a temporal perspective, the operation results in a syntax of uneven, discontinuous movements and gestures full of ruptures, arrested motion, and stuttering rebeginnings. On the other hand, looking at it spatially, the dancers' bodies are never autonomous agents expressing their will as represented subjects. First, as bodies, they are defigured into multiple parts whereby movement is edited on the very site of the body. Several editing procedures can be noted. There is a machine in the dancer's gaze that watches the body as the body moves independently of the gaze. A body part is captured in a movement that is then scratched in a reverse loop. A joint is immobilized to become the center of the whole body rotating around it, or it is shifted by way of a geometrical translation in space. A residual shadow movement is traced by the body and made to vibrate. In concrete performances, for instance in *Solo Me*, a sequence of movements is at pains to establish itself as a phrase by constantly repeating its own beginning on several parallel lines, like the various graphic fonts of a musical staff, showing the impossible instauration of a start. Or in *Fleshdance*, the three bodies are "hinged" between the vertical wall and the horizontal floor, constraining movement in order to make visible the emergence of surfaces and their haptic qualities. Or in *SEMI-INTERPRETATIONS*, gestures bring limbs into a parallelism that hinders the body's progressive transformation, its evolutionary becoming. In *Changes*, movement is the result of a constructed obstacle that reshapes the very mechanics of movement. There are always two places from which motion is simultaneously initiated, perhaps in order to prevent the mover from identifying with the movement as a living trace of his or her subjectivity. The resistance stems from within the body, where one body part, arrested in a gesture, is isolated and

14 — I learned this term during a two-week BADco workshop at P.A.R.T.S. Research Studios in Brussels, February 8–19, 2016.

15 — Goran Sergej Pristaš, "Eksplodirani pogled jedne poetike," unpublished manuscript, my translation.

16 — The topos of the sky as a white page into which an intuitive flow of poetry or music spills can be found in Stéphane Mallarmé's "L'Après-Midi d'un Faun," trans. Roger Fry, available at <http://www.angelfire.com/art/doiit/mallarme.html>. Mallarmé's poem is the basis for Claude Debussy's eponymous symphonic poem and Vaslav Nijinsky's seminal choreography:

No water murmurs but what my flute pours  
On the chord sprinkled thickest; and the sole wind  
Prompt to exhale from my two pipes, before  
It scatters the sound in a waterless shower,  
Is, on the horizon's unwrinkled space,  
The visible serene artificial breath  
Of inspiration, which regains the sky.

A similar strain of metaphors capturing dance by poetic and philosophical tropes of lightness and ephemerality and continuous thought can be found in Alain Badiou's "Dance as a Metaphor for Thought," in *Inaesthetics* (London, 2005), 57–71.

17 — Ivana Ivković, "Noise as a Strategy of Production," *Frakcija Performing Arts Journal* 26/27 (2003).

objectified as a part of a new machine, a thing in a disjunctive capture with the rest of the body, which then strides or plods, or turns upon itself in friction with the whole of the body.

In the most striking scene of the same work, an intense magenta erases the depth of the whole space and flattens it in such a way that the figures of the dancers merge with the background. Five bodies spin on a fixed spot with one limb captured in a gesture, which makes turning look less swift and supple than a pirouette; it is an awkward human-made merry-go-round. Nikolina Pristaš, who signs the choreography for this piece, told me that “dance movement always falls between gesture and noise.” Her notions of gesture and noise involve several possible references, one of which is Michel Serres, who wrote in *The Parasite* that “systems have been immunized by becoming more complex. They became stronger by becoming more tolerant . . . An organism lives very well with its microbes; it lives better and is hardened by them.”<sup>18</sup> Unlike the binary logic of information theory, which opposes message to noise, a complex interchange of functions between parallel and interfering systems includes noise as part of communication. What will be perceived as noise or as message depends on the position of the observer and the action of the actor. Order and disorder can’t be regulated by exclusion or repression, in the same way that, for instance, the Western history of music has privileged tones and silenced noises, or that judgments of what looks contemporary and what is old-fashioned are regulated. Instead, there exists an ecology of complex systems, or environments, in which hosts and parasites, tones and noises, words and moves, legible gestures and illiterate dancing coexist.

It is as if the bodies denaturalize a purportedly organic synthesis between the movement and the body expressed through seamless flow, or through the dynamic of tension and release, by a logic of auto-immunity. They enhance themselves with their own “antibodies,” in self-defense against imagined external others. And they persist in their obstructed movement and programmed inertia, not giving in to the narcissistic self-indulgence of facility, but staying within the joy of the labor recognized by dancing itself. They spin in one sense and then return in the opposite sense, until the configuration lasts, or expires by the sheer effect of

inertia. Nothing is achieved during those four minutes and thirty-three seconds framed by the BBC broadcast of John Cage’s famous silent piece. The kinetic composition is mesmerizing, though. Movement becomes a sort of visual humming. The channel of communication lets noise in as a parasite that will take over the territory of gesture, or the gesture itself has transformed into a humming noise, a *rumor* (pun with Latin etymology intended), the sonic by-product of its own labor of execution.

A little earlier in the performance, a stream of thoughts delivered by the dancers can be heard, along with a voice from the side. One voice speaks the following text:

*It is said that one of our artists was lately led by his observation and knowledge of Western art to a conclusion that art cannot exist anymore in the West. This is not to say that there isn’t any. Why cannot art exist anymore in the West? The answer is simple. Artists in the West are not lazy. Artists from the East are lazy; whether they will stay lazy now when they are no longer Eastern artists, remains to be seen. That artist sees laziness as the absence of movement and thought, dumb time—total amnesia. It is also indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence. It is sheer stupidity, a time of pain, futile concentration. Those virtues of laziness are important factors in art. Knowing about laziness is not enough; it must be practiced and perfected.*<sup>19</sup>

This text is a paraphrase of the same manifesto by Stilinović quoted earlier. Another voice delivers a hybrid mixture of two political speeches (Nicolas Sarkozy’s notorious anti-May ’68 speech and a speech by the right-wing mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić):

*I am not a charismatic person. I am a hard worker, a pragmatic and a good ant. I beat all my competitors with work, love and kindness. My message to my rivals is that they can fight against me only with more work, love and kindness. All those poor fellows cannot knock down what I can build. The ant tried to persuade the cricket: I am the humblest ant in the world. There are not many like that. You show me another one in the ant hill who works as much as I do and who is willing to sacrifice 16 hours a day and 363 days a year*

18 — Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis, 2007), 68. I learned from Nikolina Pristaš about BADco’s reference to Serres’s *Parasite in Changes*.

19 — Quote from the English version of the text I obtained from the artists.

like me. I don't think there are many like that . . . Inside me emotions are not dead, I am not crude, pragmatic and a politician, sterile and castrated. I am still an ant.<sup>20</sup>

A lucid allegory of dance as the epitome of neoliberal immaterial labor is invoked through this fable of the ant and the grasshopper, the hard worker who collects, sorts out, and builds and the parasite nomad and beggar who entertains the others and thinks no evil as long as he or she sings. Together the two figures constitute the contradiction of the false luxury of precariousness, which describes not only the position of the contemporary post-Fordist worker—not least a dancer in Zagreb, whose main asset is hard physical labor—but also the compulsory errancy of socially unrecognized and undervalued work, or the work cynically misapprehended as parasitic.

### A Theater of Refraction

Until now, I have privileged the *choreographic* problems in the poetics of BADco. However, this focus has overshadowed the role of *dramaturgy* in the complex sense of the theater machine that each performance of BADco installs. In BADco's own words, theater is endowed with the power of "refracting the world," whereby the fourth wall acts as a point of interruption, exposing the world in a mode of observation other than the everyday real—as a meshwork of heterogeneous interdependent elements, a machinic assemblage, an artificial choreographic environment.<sup>21</sup> The interruption by way of the fourth wall can't be reduced to the idea of the *finestra aperta*, or the mimetic representation that suspends disbelief with a banal sense of a flickering illusion. Goran Sergej Pristaš writes: "Theater, they say, is capable of representing everything, but we are not interested in representing the whole, but to examine ways in which things cross and turn . . . A sharp eye must be directed to the places of friction, resistance, deviation, or distortion."<sup>22</sup>

In the 2006 work *memories are made of this . . . performance notes*, the following projected text appears several times, alternating the words that indicate the space described:

*I will dance (live) (shop) (stroll) so that every movement (payment) (step) I perform (walk), I never really perform (live) (pay) to the full,*

*but interrupt with another movement (payment). I will not attempt to connect these interruptions. With the parts of my moving body (apartment) (shop's architecture) (path) I won't form lines and planes; I will imagine that lines and planes have perpetually existed in this space (park). I will work (live) (shop) with (in) multiple (shop departments) parts of my body (apartment) simultaneously. I will not give in to inertia, but will impede it. I will not explore construction, but deconstruction of space into geometrical forms that strike me, speaking with contingency, from the exterior and motorise my body (habitation) (shopping). I will dance (pack my goods) (stroll) in the left-right-front-back directions, and in all combinations of those directions.*

The substitution of words referencing the described space started at the very entrance to the theater, where the dancers were directing the audience into the hall. Each dancer was describing a different space with a different architecture, according to the function of the space the audience was supposed to see, or rather imagine: a shopping mall, a cultural center, an underground railway, a housing project. They were not arguing, but rather complementing one another, or deviating from the others' descriptions in a conjunctive way, adding "this . . . and then that . . .," resulting in some funny matches or mismatches among their visions, and between these visions and the actual theater hall we were standing in. By the end of this overture, the space had been overwritten and transcoded so many times that the audience could have only a generic memory of it. Perhaps the result was that kind of synchrony of images that is mobilized by new generic cities, which Rem Koolhaas has termed "memories of memories: if not all memories at the same time, then at least an abstract, token memory."<sup>23</sup> The same applies to several other materials experienced during the performance: a Dean Martin song ("Memories Are Made of This"), or a dialogue from Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*. The memory or even nostalgia we might feel is actually a nostalgia for nostalgia, which isn't the same as recollecting the sensation of having had a sensation in the past. In memory, time can slip into a future with a past inflection, a future anterior. Films and music, or some of their historical genres, but also home-media like TV, video, and photos exercise that power of foresight, partaking in the sensorial with no reference to

20 — Ibid.

21 — Theater of refraction was discussed during the two-week workshop given by BADco, February 8–19, 2016, cited in note 14.

22 — Pristaš, "Eksplodirani pogled jedne poetike."

23 — Quoted from a projection in the performance *Memories*.



the lived and the personal. I have never lived in the 1950s or been to the Grand Canyon, but I can evoke the way each of them feels. I will have lived it from the remembrance of a fictive past.

Working from F. Scott Fitzgerald's notes (written fragments of thoughts the American writer accumulated over many years and classified as "Observations," "Ideas," "Scenes and Situations," "Conversations and Things Overheard," "Feelings and Emotions," "Anecdotes," "Descriptions of Places Where I've Been," "Things I Should Remember"), BADco has developed a peculiar poietic method.<sup>24</sup> While in *Memories Fitzgerald's Notes* are often spoken to the audience, in subsequent works they are performance or choreographic notes that act as reminders of a problem the performer is supposed to undertake in an action. These notes are explicitly not tasks—tasks are meant to be executed, and therefore presuppose a mechanical efficiency. A note is not a command but a connection to a problem, and the performer is to *compose with* the note, instead of using it to conquer and *tame* the resistance of the space and time of theater. Friction, resistance, deviation, or distortion are the shadow-work operated in BADco's theater—to use Rudolf Laban's term for superfluous inefficient movements that should be eliminated according to the Taylorist management of effort at work. Hence, if the note assigns the problem of composing with an irregular light metronome (a light that goes on and off at unequal intervals), as in the solo of Zrinka Užbinec in *A Lesser Evil*, then the dancer composes her movement in regard to that situation, which is characterized by the variable visibility and sensation of objects and space. In stark contrast to the aesthetic norms of performance today, dancers in this work aren't bathed in bright lights that render their presence light, crisp, and transparent, in a space enclosing the dancer's figure in an auratic volume of movement. The figure is instead often plunged in an opaque and volatile atmosphere of sounds, noises, and lighting, dancing "as if the curtain had never been raised!" to paraphrase Denis Diderot. The machine is in the performer's gaze, and likewise, the machine is in the desire of the spectator; there is no place for a self-referential mirroring gaze or invitation to the audience to participate. The theater's apparatus of representation, invested in the act of communication through the contract of address

and response, is undermined by another spectatorial perspective: "We are intrigued precisely by the possibility of constructing that *side* position, of making the viewer aware of the existence of a *side* position, a position that sees the object of perception, the viewer, and the act of viewing as a single whole."<sup>25</sup> That side position was once occupied by the king sitting on his royal balcony, from which vantage he could view both the opera stage and the auditorium. Today it might be argued that the side perspective is the viewing stance of a curator, the one who manages the valorization of an artwork through the performatively monitored participation of the visitors.<sup>26</sup> In light of the law of exchange value, BADco operates a regime of visibility that includes opacity and the sensorial thickness of problems.

### Deferred Action

If posing a problem, in the Deleuzian sense of the creation and genetic account of thought, is that which gives rise to an experiment in dance or performance, then it must also give rise to a completely different horizon of the temporality of production. Deleuze writes that "[the problem] is solved once it is posited and determined, but still objectively persists in the solutions to which it gives rise and from which it differs in kind."<sup>27</sup> This orients creation toward a deferred action and delayed effect. Being outside the privilege of touring, that is, outside the circulation of performances on the Western European art market for decades, has given BADco the advantage of delay. Belatedness in terms of the history of progress can be positive, in the sense of taking time, delaying productivity as a resistance to accumulation, or in the sense, as Bojana Kunst writes, of "a specific working attitude which doesn't subjugate the working processes to the acceleration of time." The works of BADco have often compelled me to return to them, to view in them again a deferred and delayed action of ideas, poetics, procedures, and techniques—things that intrigued me though I couldn't grasp why, things I failed to perceive at first. Rather than "capturing" our attention, BADco "makes haste slowly," in a slow art that searches out poietic means with which to compose.

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24 — Published in F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up, with Other Uncollected Pieces, Notebooks, and Unpublished Letters* (New York, 1945).

25 — "On Semi-Interpretations: A Discussion by Jasna Žmak and Nikola Pristaš," available at BADco, Publications, <https://bezimeni.wordpress.com/texts/>.

26 — See B. Cvejić, "Notes for a Society of Performance," in *Composing Differences*, ed. Virginie Bobin (Paris, 2015).

27 — Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 280.



# 6





1918

мое право на  
образование  
и профессию

???? - закон о домашнем  
насилии

???? - право на оплату  
домашнего труда

???? - право на создание  
однополой семьи

6

# **Deconstructing Gender Discourses**

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# Introduction

KETI CHUKHROV

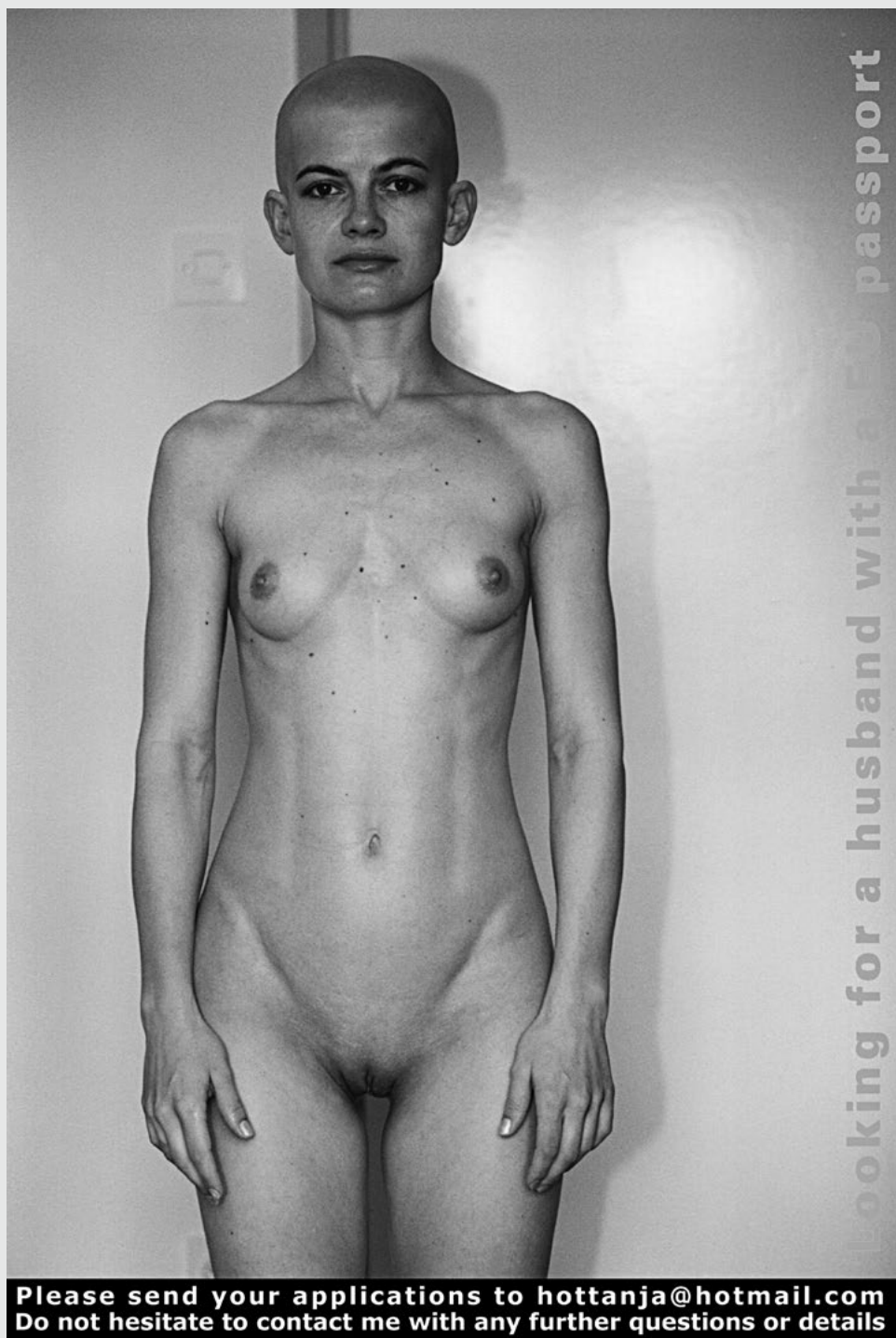
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**When it comes to researching issues of gender in the former socialist societies,** one soon stumbles upon a stereotype common in the post-Cold War era: that the lexicons of emancipation in formerly socialist societies could be the same as those in the West, if only they could be considered separately from the ideological regulations imposed on those societies by their bureaucratic apparatuses. Such an approach leads to the search for latent narratives of gender difference and hidden sexualities amid coercively desexualized totalitarian cultures; implicit gender manifestations, underground feminisms, clandestine representations of sexuality are sought in the “forbidden” unofficial culture and shadow economy. This stance prevailed in “Eastern” cultural studies and curatorial projects in the aftermath of 1989, caused by fear among cultural agents during the early postcommunist era that the West might detect some inherent, ineradicable communism in the postsocialist “bodies” that had been “liberated” from communist ideology, as Branislav Dimitrijević and Branislava Andjelković argue in this chapter. Hence, postsocialist art had to prove that even if its “body” could be related to communism, this was only in the context of the struggle against ideology; otherwise, socialist body politics of resistance and gender subversion applied the same lexicons as the “conventional” body of Western democracy. The body and power dispositions of historical socialism and its aftermath have thus often been seen through the prism of the systems of postindustrial capitalist production based on the surplus economy (the libidinal economy of desire), where, in fact, the dispositions of body and power functioned otherwise in the conditions of distributive deprivatized economy.

This is the reason why, in addition to the application of “classical” theoretical references to the research of gender and sexuality in the postsocialist context (e.g., Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Rosi Braidotti), it is important to take into account the conditions of the socialist non-libidinal planned economy in retrospectively analyzing gender composition in classless society. In this case we would have to deal not merely with the ideological divergences between two social systems—disciplinary/totalitarian versus postdisciplinary/liberal democratic—but with the fact that under each system, the paradigms of economy and production produce specific compositions of social life and its biopolitical regulations, gender constitution included.

Interestingly, most theoretical frameworks we look towards when it comes to the social analysis of gender construction and representation—Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Butler—ignore the economic aspect altogether. It was only in Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (1974) that surplus value as the principal feature of capitalist economics was tied to the libidinal dimension of production and the economy of desire and enjoyment; it follows that if the surplus value is evicted from economics, so, too, is the production of pleasure and enjoyment. No surprise, then, that gender constitution in Central and Eastern Europe changes immediately and drastically with the shift from the non-libidinal economies of socialism towards the primitive accumulation of the late-socialist and early postsocialist periods.





Tanja Ostojić. The "ad" from *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*. 2000–05.  
Participatory web project and multimedia installation. Courtesy the artist



To show why the traditional (Western/capitalist) theories of gender are not fully applicable to former socialist societies, it is sufficient to dwell on one paradox of Butler's theory of gender composition, itself very much influenced by Louis Althusser's theory of Subject and Foucault's theory of sexuality.<sup>1</sup> According to this paradoxical logic, the Subject is subjugating itself by virtue of creating itself. A similar logic exists for desire and sexuality: without the attempts to control desire, one cannot experience that very desire; without clinical surveillance of sexuality, one cannot acquire the lexicons of sexual enjoyment.

The same goes, in a way, for the notion of "the social": it is the site that subordinates the individual, yet it is also the playground for displaying acts of emancipation. It is because of such ambivalence of the social field that Butler emphasizes the double-bind genealogy of the Subject and searches for the remainder of social space free from subjugation by the "apparatuses" (social institutions broadly).<sup>2</sup> It is here, for Butler, that the gendered body and its psychic dimension exist, a function of the minimal but genuine agency capable of evading and subverting the biopolitics of social control.

It means that it is only in the realm of the psyche and of *individual* body subversions that one is able to resist the power discourse; the question remains, how to extend such solipsistic resistance into the commons? As theorized by Butler and others in the Western tradition, the notion of gender bears the imprint of such solitariness in its genealogy: gender's genealogy is the twofold process of subjugation and emancipatory yearning, but according to Butler, this yearning is generated as a result of the "initial loss" of the Other, and is due to the narcissistic internalization of such loss (i.e., its acceptance). This is the reason why gender is a category of crisis and can be identified with social melancholy. As Butler writes, in melancholy not only is the Other, or the ideal, lost from the consciousness, but the very social world in which this loss took place. So "the melancholic gender" not only internalizes the lost ideal, but shifts the whole configuration of the social world into the individual psyche.<sup>3</sup>

If that is so, if the resistant agency of gender disposition is only negatively related to the social, what then makes such disposition socially productive?

Although Butler tries to reconnect the melancholic individual with the Other in the social stratum, such an attempt, as she describes it, remains speculative and insufficiently active. Society is the realm of Others, the realm that has not been invented by "me"; in "my" realm, the realm of "my" psyche and gender composition, the Other is either alien or absent, internalized, tamed, or discarded.<sup>4</sup> This is the reason why the "Big Other"—the ideal, the commons—confronts the self as certain symbolic impositions, which colonize the psyche that, in turn, resists such "colonization."

Thus we return to the idea of sociality as a double-bind category, the realm where one can enact the performance of freedom, but at the same time it remains the site of coercion and alienation, by virtue of it being prior, external, and alien to the individual. Social critique, therefore, does not construct the common zone between the individual and sociality; rather, it allows individual agency to expand the sites of critical conduct

1 — Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127–188. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (London: Penguin, 1976).

2 — Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. chapter 1, "Stubborn Attachment, Bodily Subjection," 31–62.

3 — *Ibid.*, 178–187.

4 — *Ibid.*, 132–150.

or subcultural subversions within the sociality that remains otherwise alienated. The chief transformative potential of such a gendered body is to provoke power by performative and subversive exposures of its trauma (the trauma caused by the confrontation with ideology and its apparatuses), and to treat such exposures as liberating.

Paradoxical as it seems, the productiveness of sociality is thus recuperated when the solipsistic and resistant gendered body, freed from social surveillance, is then exposed in that very social context to confirm the emancipatory agency of both—of its solipsistic escapism and its subversive intervention into the otherwise alienated social context.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this “negative” sense that gender and psyche can be considered socially productive. The emancipatory demand in this case is not that society should integrate and normalize subversiveness, but rather that it should allow for the performance of subversiveness within a special, legally delimited site, separate from the accepted conventions of normality. In other words, in its primary disposition, the social sphere is alien to the gendered individual and her gender performance. The right to subversive deviation and abnormality as the demand of emancipation, rather than the normalization of the hitherto non-normal, arises from this alienation.

Conversely, in works by Marx and subsequent Marxist philosophers, such as Lev Vygotsky, Evald Ilyenkov, Georg Lukács, Cornelius Castoriadis, and others, the realm of sociality is not *a priori* marked by regulation or subjugation.<sup>6</sup> What comes prior to “me” as the diachrony of society created by “others” is not necessarily considered to be an ideological imposition that coercively attaches the ego to something that exceeds it—family, state, culture, law, or other social apparatuses. On the contrary, sociality as something that is beyond “me” amplifies and constructs the Subject; it is only via the social genesis that the Subject’s consciousness might be posited. The realm of sociality is thus not the site where the loss of “others” is demonstrated and emancipation is posited as the enhanced territory of such demonstration; it is in the priority of the common cause for any citizen, regardless of gender difference.

The Subject’s consciousness, then, is but the reflection of the objective world; the Subject, in this case, can only be constructed out of social objectivity. The permeation of the signs and elements of sociality into the realm of “me” is not implied as an obstacle to certain countercultural or counter-social freedoms, but on the contrary, such signs of the common and the objective can only free the Subject from the captivity of her own solipsistic privacy.

It was this conception of sociality that served as paradigm for the socialist system with the evicted surplus economy. As a result of the deprivatization of common wealth, the social sphere had to sublimate its alienated genesis and become a productive sphere of civic conduct. Gender could then be applied in terms of equality rather than difference, and function as a virtue of the common rather than a “trouble.”<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, in the years immediately following the Russian Revolution, the first experiments with gender and sexuality overtly undermined the binary identification of

5 — See André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

6 — Lev Vygotsky’s *Thoughts and Language* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012 [rev. ed.]) is relevant here; see also Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K. Blamey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998);

and Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).

7 — I am, of course, referencing Butler’s seminal *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

gender difference. In this program of emancipation, it was not that a woman could be empowered and a man's phallic power deconstructed. It was that maleness and femaleness had to be sublated as biosocial identities in favor of the political commons. If any gender conduct hitherto considered to be abnormal was to be inscribed into such a generalized social field, then what had been deviant, vulnerable, or traumatic had to acquire affirmative social markers, integrating them into the broader projection of the commons. As is widely known, the early Soviet socialist society was highly accepting of the normalization of gender difference in the frame of socialist citizenship.

Although such normalization didn't in fact fully happen in the socialist states, owing to the patriarchal re-genderization of society under Stalin, the non-libidinal economy nevertheless generated a disposition according to which the *social* markers of gender always prevailed over the *biological* or *sexual* ones.

In the logic of the libidinal, capitalist economy, however, deviation produces surplus pleasure, its production instigated by the lack of the commons. Deviation or subversion remain unintegrated from the sociality, simultaneously permitted as the performance of legitimized abnormality in the space of social subculture, or as sites of identity production.

The texts in this chapter excellently manifest the abovementioned contradictions inherent in the postsocialist transition from the disciplinary commons to the postdisciplinary performances of solipsistic freedoms.

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## Summary of Critical Texts

MAGDALENA MOSKALEWICZ

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Writing and rewriting art-historical narratives is never geographically neutral, and it shouldn't be gender neutral either. Much of the post-1989 rewriting of Eastern European art histories had, however, been done in a truly modernist, genderless manner. Here to open this chapter focusing on gender discourses is an essay by Bojana Pejić, who recognized the issue and attempted to correct it with her major exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (2010). In the show and its accompanying publication, Pejić explored the complex relationship between socialism and gender, tracing the gendering of power in both official and alternative artistic practices. She also called for recognition of the various ideologies—beyond communism—responsible for the existence of patriarchal societies in Eastern Europe.

An attempt to articulate the theory of socialist patriarchy in the Soviet Union had been undertaken already in 1993 by Margarita Tupitsyn, in the exhibition and publication *After Perestroika: Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen*. Tupitsyn's text focuses on the slow rise of feminist consciousness in the newly democratic Russia and laments the virtual absence of feminist discourse in the country. She also disrupts the conventional narrative of art under socialism that described the binary opposition of official state-controlled art versus the alternative, underground practices that created space for artistic freedom, arguing that both were governed by the same type of gender

hierarchies. Described by her, widespread rejection of the feminist label by women artists (and women generally) shortly after communism's collapse is a theme repeated in many essays included here. Such was the experience of artists in the former Czechoslovakia, whose initial reluctance to reflect on gender difference resulted from what was, in fact, an intrinsically gendered system of art education, circulation, and reception that was paradoxically perceived as gender neutral—a vestige of socialism. Zuzana Štefková traces a number of contemporary art exhibitions by both male and female artists in the Czech and Slovak Republics, and her overview of the institutional framework—art museums, galleries, academies—outlines the organization of structural patriarchy that underlay collecting, circulating, and educational practices there in the 1990s and 2000s.

After a decade or so of the slow absorption of feminist and queer theories into higher education and public debates in Central and Eastern Europe, many artists, activists, and theoreticians started to question the adaptability of these Western-born theories to local histories and gender constructs, and to investigate their own culturally specific conceptual frameworks. One of the more compelling examples of this comes from the artist Yevgeniy Fiks, who recognized the threat posed by the dominant globalized models of gender identity to the particularities of Eastern European gay, lesbian, and queer communities. In his powerful manifesto, Fiks denounces Western queer theory as an instrument of neoliberal expansion and repression: “Until we meet Judith Butler in the ‘Sadko’ café or at the ‘Prospect Marksa’ metro station, queer theory will not become post-Soviet theory.” Fiks’s own “Theory of *Pleshka*,” dedicated to culturally specific recognition of the Soviet and post-Soviet LGBTQ community, is conceptualized as queer theory with the subtraction of cultural imperialism. Relatedly, Martina Pachmanová describes the scale of the challenge brought by the new attempts to build a consistent and original gender discourse in the region’s visual arts. She argues that initial local hostility and distrust towards feminist theories and agendas resulted in the double marginalization of Eastern European feminisms: their rejection in their countries of origin was mirrored by their exclusion from the mainstream Western narratives. The goal of Pachmanová and fellow actors in the region is now the integration of Eastern European discourses and strategies into the global feminist agenda.

An important part of establishing the cultural identity of postcommunist societies in relation to the West is the construction of fantasy. To support that argument, Branislav Dimitrijević and Branislava Andjelković focus on the analysis of male desire and present ideology as always inscribed in the body. Be it communist, capitalist, patriarchal, or nationalist, ideology is embedded in the individual as well as the collective body of a nation, and materializes itself, every time anew, in bodily actions and collective rituals.

That “[w]e had our own language and our own feelings before the ’90s brought us globalization” (Fiks) and that “[w]e—in the East—should learn how to speak for ourselves on the global level” (Pachmanová) are sentiments common to many of the essays included here. They also provide new tools of analysis applicable to art practices that came earlier, when radical feminist gestures had been performed before they were named as such. This chapter concludes with two specific case studies of individual women artists. Ewa Majewska’s analysis of Ewa Partum’s work presents the artist’s practice as a crucial renegotiation of the notion of public art, heralding a feminism that—in the case of Poland—was yet to come. On the other end of the spectrum, the

explicitly feminist work created by Sanja Iveković in the former Yugoslavia can be seen as an artistic and political gesture of rejecting female guilt: Ivana Bago argues that, already in the 1970s, Iveković was enacting the feminist politics of solidarity and coalition. May these two case studies exemplify such recent rewriting of art-historical narratives that honors both the geographic and gender specificity of their subjects.

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## Conversation

SANJA IVEKOVIĆ WITH ANA JANEVSKI

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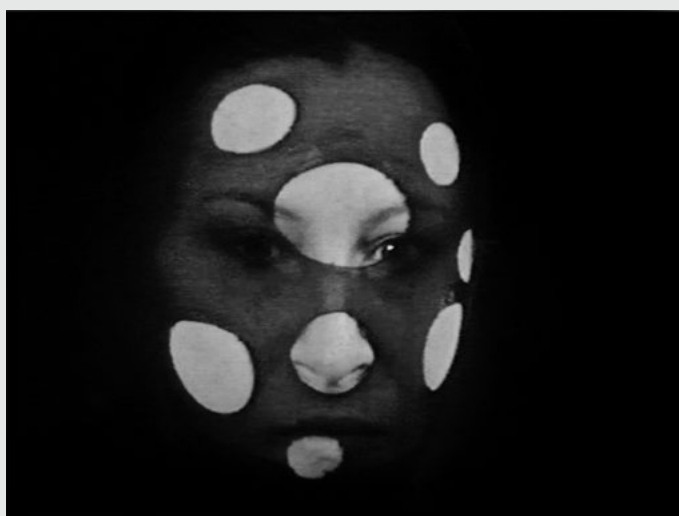
**ANA JANEVSKI:** How do you understand the term and notion of “Eastern Europe” from the perspective of today, almost thirty years after the end of socialism?

**SANJA IVEKOVIĆ:** To give a definition of Eastern Europe is a difficult or almost impossible task because it’s about a social and cultural construct. I looked at the English-language Wikipedia and found the following sentence: “There are almost as many definitions of Eastern Europe as there are scholars of the region.” What we all know is that at the beginning of the ’90s, the term “Eastern Europe” encompassed all the European communist countries. Although Yugoslavia was not officially part of that bloc, my definition (based on my own experience) includes Yugoslavia as well. After the collapse of the communist regimes, the picture of Eastern Europe completely changed. It became a phantom for those in the East as well as in the West or, perhaps more apt, a phantom limb. As in the case of that fascinating medical phenomenon when people feel pain in limbs that are not there anymore, today many suffer from nostalgia. [Slavoj] Žižek has the best answer to that: “One should not consider what current time has to say about communism but what the communist idea has to say about current times.”

**AJ:** You have considered yourself a feminist artist since the ’70s, and the first feminist conference held at Belgrade’s Student Cultural Center in 1978, under the title “Comrade Woman: The Women’s Question – A New Approach?” [*“Drug-ca Žena: Žensko Pitanje – Novi Pristup?”*], was very important to you.

It was the first autonomous second-wave feminist event in Eastern Europe, specifically Southeastern Europe, and it is considered a turning point in Yugoslav history. It paved the way for feminist theory to begin to inform the social and cultural discourse of Yugoslavia, but the new research did not include the visual arts. The feminist reflection of your work came only later. When and how did that happen?

**SI:** Generationally I am part of the group of Croatian artists that was formed in the ’70s and made a radical break with the local artistic tradition, yet it was still a “male scene.” I encountered feminist art for the first time at the first exhibition of European video art, *Trigon ’73* in Graz, which included works by VALIE EXPORT as well as by American artists such as Lynda Benglis, Joan Jonas, Trisha Brown, and Hermine Freed. The following year in Lausanne at the second international exhibition *Impact Art—Video Art*, I saw works by Eleanor Antin, Martha Rosler, and Yvonne Rainer. And in international art magazines such as *Flash Art*, *Artforum*, and *Avalanche* I had the opportunity to read



Sanja Iveković. *Personal Cuts*. 1982. Video (color, sound), 4 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Gift of Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, Anna Marie and Robert F. Shapiro, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis,  
and Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds

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about feminist art. I found it all very inspiring, so at my first solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, in 1976, I showed works that problematized the position of women in society, representations of women in the media, and my own position as a woman artist within the art system. This was two years before the well-known international conference in Belgrade. I started with the practice; the theory came later. I started to educate myself in feminist and gender theory at the “Woman and Society” meetings, which were organized within the Association of Sociologists by a group of feminists who, at the time, were producing a great number of theoretical texts and magazine articles, but who did not recognize visual art as a part of that discourse. Feminist art critique and critical texts from feminist art theory appeared only in the '90s. The Center for Women's Studies [Zagreb] had an important role in promoting feminist theory and practice on the local scene. It was founded in 1995, and it is led by feminists, scientists, artists, and women with experience in women's and civil activism. I was one of the founders, so I taught for several years on the subject of feminist artistic practice. The center has launched a magazine, *Third*, which also deals with feminist art. The first feminist text about my work was written by Bojana Pejić under the title “Methonimical Moves,” and it appeared in the catalogue for Manifesta 2 published by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. Yet even today there is no systematic research of the feminist artistic scene, and still some of the women artists don't want to be called feminist artists, mostly, it seems, because they think that this “label” would narrow the perception of their work and the meaning of their practice. We should not forget that the myth of art with no gender is still present, and that the [postcommunist] transition brought a remasculinization of society.

**AJ: Your socially critical practice continues today, and in the last twenty years you have often worked collaboratively with activist groups and civil society initiatives, in Croatia as well as around the world. Why do you find such collaboration important in your practice? And how does the collaborative practice translate into exhibition practice?**

SI: I consider the work I do with women's NGOs an important part of my education. Women's groups have had a crucial role in the process of building a civil society in Croatia, because they have promoted new organizational models and different ways of articulating their own interests from those in the mainstream or as defined by traditional social rules. I would agree with the argument that women's groups were fundamental to the process of democratization in the region. Namely, women's groups were the first autonomous initiatives to organize themselves outside of the existing institutions, like the socialist groups or the unions. My own collaboration with women's groups was a very precious experience as I started to change the methods and content of my work. The biggest value of the collaborative projects is that the work with other women makes me feel that I am participating in something that is bigger than I am, that has not only a personal but a larger political importance. I was not so familiar with the issue of violence towards women when I started the project *Women's House* in 1998; this subject was not so present in the art world. My work has changed since then, everything around us has changed, the borders are fluid, the enemies are more and more invisible, and since I don't belong to the generation that formed itself in the society of spectacle, I still stubbornly believe that resistance is possible. What concerns me is that



today art functions as a place for the discussion of all burning political questions, but this reflection remains within the art system; it doesn't reach the streets or parliaments.

**AJ: You are one of the pioneers of new media, performance, and video art.**

**What are the strategies for effective feminist work today?**

**SI:** I don't have a prescription for an effective feminist work today. I think that it's important to abandon the idea that feminism has to deal only with women. In my work, I have always wanted to deal with real problems in society, no matter whether they are about the position of women or the Roma people, marginalized workers, and all the other "others." I always try to critically reflect my own position, my role in the art system as well as what happens to me as a citizen. I think that the strength of the artistic act is not only to reflect social reality but to actively participate in the creation of the collective and social imaginary. It is the role of the artist to find each time a new model to deal with the difficult issues, one which enables the viewer to reflect upon contemporary society and to rethink his or her place in it.

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# Proletarians of All Countries, Who Washes Your Socks?: Equality, Dominance, and Difference in Eastern European Art

BOJANA PEJIĆ

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[...]

With very few exceptions, editors of and contributors to the publications mapping art in Eastern Europe seem to be aware that writing histories of art is not geographically neutral; thus, it comes as a paradox that they succeed nevertheless in rewriting “our” art histories with a method of “strategic universalism.” In other words, numerous narratives about Eastern European art give priority to modernist concepts of the autonomy of art, self-expression, and the artist’s subjectivity. Certainly, insisting on culture and art as autonomous from the state in the communist context is important; this art was usually presumed to be a critical response to the period of socialist realism, when culture was directly instrumentalized by Party apparatuses. One should not disrespect that the implementation of modernist theories and art practices during the communist tenure—abstract art was accepted as “official ideology” in SFR Yugoslavia and was greatly tolerated in Poland, for example—had enormous importance in the 1960s; the “universal” abstract art practices in many communist countries enabled the visual arts to escape “the tyranny of the representational” (Gen Doy) emblematic of socialist realist imagery. However, when we intend to rewrite these Eastern European narratives today, can we really still stick to the modernist ideal, according to which the autonomous art in state socialism was indeed “universal,” given that it placed itself “above” ideologically charged socialist reality? Addressing this matter in another context, Piotr Piotrowski argues: “The majority of critics and art historians from East-Central Europe saw as their main problem the issue of how to integrate the region’s art practices into the universal art canon, or, more precisely, into Western art history.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition, due to its “universalizing” aspirations, the recent remaking of Eastern modernisms is performed in a truly modernist

manner: In the current rewritings, “our” art histories appear as genderless as those written in the West before the 1970s. In saying this, I do not intend to deny the extreme importance of existing endeavors, as they offer an excellent amount of information and, indeed, constitute a solid basis for any further studies about art in the region. I do not say either that they exclude examination of women’s practices or that female art historians engaged in modernist discourses are omitted. What I would like to stress is that the application of “strategic universalism,” as any universalism for that matter, does not reveal the technologies of gender and erasures of difference entangled in socialist and post-socialist art practices and the channels through which these practices function. Simply put, what “our” rewriting of “our” art histories needs is feminist interventions. In the past fifteen or so years, in most, if not all, post-communist countries, art historians and curators informed by gender and feminist theories have produced countless studies intervening in their national art histories: they rewrote the early modern period and the avant-garde art of the 1920s (Martina Pachmanová), modernist art (Edit András), and the art of the 1970s (Izabela Kowalczyk and Zora Rusinová); many of them closely followed the art of the post-socialist era, providing it with adequate theoretical—and feminist—background (Katrin Kivimaa, Suzana Milevska, Laima Kreivytė, and Aneta Szyłak). Doctoral dissertations have been published, exhibitions accompanied by catalogues are held, and articles are published in local and foreign journals and on the Web. In the main, these writings are also available in English. It is therefore amazing that in the publications dealing with Eastern Europe that have I discussed so far, feminist art historians and/or curators who have been active in Eastern Europe and who have radically questioned “humanist,” universalist and modernist canons of art history in general, and their Eastern “translations” in particular, are significantly absent.

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1 — Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

### Making Sex in State Socialism

*My particular Archimedean point, however, is not in the real transcultural body, but rather in the space between it and its representation.*

—Thomas Laqueur, 1990<sup>2</sup>

The body and/or gender understood as a “space between” suggests that these concepts are negotiated within specific historical, societal, and economic circumstances. These vary from culture to culture; moreover, within the same culture, we may encounter various conceptions of masculinity and femininity; even within the same cultural formation, these concepts are exposed to change. Hence, the building of gender in “really existing socialism,” as elsewhere, was an ongoing process, since gender constructions are based on performative practices in which, as Judith Butler asserts, “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice.”<sup>3</sup> She therefore stresses the time aspect of the gender constitution: “Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration.”<sup>4</sup> Practices of visual representation—paintings, sculptures, posters, postage stamps, press photographs, and films—are not passive actors in these constructions. Between a painter or photographer and the picture they are about to produce, there is the “space between” in which we are confronted with various discourses which circulate in the social arena, and these could be debates about education, sexuality, technology, medicine, state security and the military; the latter was central to the socialist context because the “struggle for world peace” proclaimed as the highest ideal in all of the communist states was simply a justification for their steady militarization.

All these discourses—as contradictory as they can be—contribute to the conceptualization of gender roles, which are not simply mirrored in visual representations, given that “representation is not merely reflection; it is itself an active force in moulding social relations and social understanding.”<sup>5</sup> Visual representations

are signifying practices which produce rather than reflect political, social, and cultural values. Images of “woman” and “man” pictured in high art and/or in the mass media are sites from which these meanings are disseminated. These meanings are not simply “fixed” in and by patriarchal culture in advance. Film, for example, is not an “illustration” of the culturally accepted gender roles, but it is a decisive agent that indeed “fixes” these roles (Elizabeth Cowie); in this sense, film and press photography, but also those visual representations without mass circulation, are sites in which genders are tempered.

In the early 1990s, the term “gender” was certainly the most mentioned notion in the then-nascent post-socialist feminist studies. In a gesture of critical solidarity, some feminists named this early phase of Eastern European gender studies a “post-totalitarian pre-feminism” (Mihaela Miroiu). Since then, numerous publications have dealt with the new gender constellation in post-communist geographies where gender roles became quickly redefined according to the conditions of the free-market economy and, of course, “democracy.” In order to analyze the “new” masculinity and femininity, scholars had to turn to the “old”—socialist—ones.<sup>6</sup> What they could observe were obvious differences in the status of women, and this new condition, needless to say, required a critique of post-communist patriarchies. As some time earlier, postcolonial feminist studies had opened the debate about the same issue, the question was how feminists could approach it. Judith Butler cast her doubts on the presumption that there was a universal basis for feminism: “The notion of universal patriarchy has been widely criticized in recent years for its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in

2 — Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 16 (emphasis original).

3 — Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

4 — *Ibid.*, 10.

5 — Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), 233.

6 — See *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*, eds. Magda Mueller and Nanette Funk (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); *Post-Communism and the Body Politic*, ed. Ellen E. Berry (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995); Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life after Socialism*, eds. Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); *Brüche. Geschlecht. Gesellschaft: Gender Studies zwischen Ost und West* (Ruptures. Gender. Society: Gender Studies Between East and West), eds. Alice Pechriggl and Marlen Bidwell-Steiner (Vienna: Bundesministerium für Förderung von Frauen in der Wissenschaft, 2003); *Over the Wall/After the Fall*, eds. Magdalena J. Zaborowska, Sibelan Forrester, and Elena Gapova (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); *Living Gender after Communism*, eds. Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). Two further volumes occasionally touch upon gender roles: *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, eds. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2000); *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, eds. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

which it exists. Where those various contexts have been consulted within such theories, it has been to find ‘examples’ or ‘illustrations’ of a universal principle that is assumed from the start.”<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting on the dissemination of the term “gender” in other-than-Western contexts, Joan W. Scott remarked in 1999:

*As a foreign import, often left untranslated, it serves as a point of local conflict and contestation, not so much about linguistic as about theoretical questions. Under its aegis, feminists asked how and under what conditions different roles and functions had been defined for each sex; how the very meanings of the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ varied according to time and place; how regulatory norms of sexual deportment were created and enforced; how issues of power and rights played into questions of masculinity and femininity; how symbolic structures affected the lives and practices of ordinary people; how sexual identities forged within and against social prescriptions.*<sup>8</sup>

In her feminist inquiry, Scott does not offer answers to what gender is, but instead poses questions and explains her reasons for doing so, stating that the shift in her own thinking came “through asking questions about how hierarchies such as those of gender are constructed or legitimized. The emphasis on ‘how’ suggests a study of processes, not of origins, of multiple rather than single causes, of rhetoric or discourse rather than ideology or consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

These questions, I think, can be more than useful when we try to rethink gender relations performed in state socialism, as they may allow us to bypass the previously mentioned “totalitarian model” of power. First, it is high time to abandon the term “ideology,” which, in many post-socialist studies (art history included), figures solely as “communist ideology.” Second, given that many authors (both Eastern and Western) still associate the word “ideology” with totalitarianism, we should perhaps start to talk about different ideologies, such as the ideology of socialist patriarchy, which survived despite the intentions of the communist ideology, eager in its proclamation of gender egalitarianism. Third, it seems rather urgent to dismantle a myth that communist ideology was the

only cause for the alleged “masculinization of women” in state socialism. A memorable image of “woman on a tractor” immediately comes to mind. References to this model of femininity still recur in countless (feminist) critiques of the socialist system (particularly by Russian authors), even though this particular image/model indeed belongs to the Stalinist period. What is (intentionally) forgotten or remains unsaid in such rewriting of the past is that parallel to the iconography of “women on tractors,” Soviet visual arts cherished representations of motherhood, and these were manufactured in pre-Stalinist, Stalinist, and post-Stalinist times. Whereas it is true that images of mothers (peasants, in particular) played a vital role since Stalin banned abortion in 1936, how are we to explain the perseverance of this theme after the abandonment of the Stalinist “female codex,” which occurred around the mid-1950s?

When exploring complex relationships between socialism and gender, it is important to keep in mind that gender arrangements have not only changed over time, but they have also been “geographically” situated: “Under state socialism as elsewhere, gender constructions were multiple, varying over time and place. Images of the ideal Polish woman, built within a mixed iconography of catholicism and communism, differed from the ideal Romanian woman as a mother reproducing the Romanian nation, who differed from the clearly atheistic ideal Czech woman. Gender construction of the Soviet woman worker differed from the Soviet heroic mother and the Russian peasant.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly, one cannot but respect these differences, but one can nevertheless wonder what these ideal images of socialist women may have in common. Who produced—and visualized—these ideal womanhoods and who was the addressee of these female icons?

### **A Venus in the Cosmos, a Token of Equality?**

*We cannot build Socialism only  
with female hairdressers . . .*

—Walter Ulbricht, 1962<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1990s, Kriszta Nagy, who received her education as a painter at the Budapest

7 — Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 3.

8 — Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, revised edition), XI.

9 — Ibid., 4 (italics original).

10 — Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson, eds., *Living Gender after Communism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 6.

11 — Walter Ulbricht, speech at a central GDR women’s conference, 1962; cited in Monika Gibas, “Vater Staat und seine Töchter: Offiziell propagierte Frauenbilder der DDR und ihre Sozialisationswirkungen,” (“Father State and His Daughters: Officially Propagated Images of Women in the GDR and Their Socialization Function”), in *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland (Party Line: A New Germany)*, ed. Dieter Vorsteher (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1996), 317.

Academy of Fine Arts, was also a singer and songwriter in the all-women pop band Tereškova. Not only our Western contemporaries, but also many younger people who grew up in post-Wall democracies, do not know who Tereškova was. Valentina Vladimirovna Tereškova was the first female Soviet citizen to go into outer space—on June 16, 1963. Before she started her training (together with four other women) at a cosmonaut base near Moscow called “Star City,” she had perhaps the most common woman’s occupation, that of textile worker. The first woman who went into orbit was certainly an important token in the Cold War Soviet–American contest over space. In the Soviet zone, in East Germany, for example, she was celebrated as “Venus from Star City,” and the state issued a postage stamp with her portrait. Surprisingly enough, the fact that a heroine of socialist labor went into space was not used as a demonstration of women’s equality in socialism. Instead, the East German press wrote endlessly about her “tremendous patriotism,” her “love for work,” her “simple nature” and “modesty.”<sup>12</sup> She traveled all around the countries belonging to the “socialist brotherhood” as well as in the West, and for a while she was considered a star. In the Eastern part of the world, she represented the highest socialist ideal: she was the very embodiment of the Modern Woman.

As the heroine of modernity, Tereškova thus incorporated—for a while—a socialist dream that was never truly reached: about women’s involvement in high technology, often considered the uppermost level of their emancipation. Soon after her flight, she married and had a daughter, and in this sense proved that, despite her fame and public exposure, she was “just” a simple woman. Her case may be illustrative of the state’s ambivalent attitude toward its female citizens: “Indeed, socialist regimes were often characterized by contradictory goals in their policies toward women: They wanted workers as well as mothers, token leaders as well as quiescent typists.”<sup>13</sup> In an

anthology recently published in Georgia, Lela Gafrindashvili also turns to the socialist “solution” of women’s equality, and rightly titles her article as a question: “Mothers’ Question and/or Women’s Question.”<sup>14</sup>

In implementing the equality of its male and female subjects, the socialist apparatus, including official women’s organizations, manifested open intolerance toward feminism, regarded as a damaging “import” from the capitalist West. In “solving” the women’s question by giving women the right to vote, to work, and, in many (though not all) communist states, the right to abortion, they did not find any reason to treat the women’s condition in a separate way. Thus, always turning back to Friedrich Engels and his vital work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), the class issue was talked about ad nauseum. Thus, as late as 1978, Vida Tomšič, a Yugoslav communist born in Slovenia, war veteran, and long-time president of the Antifascist Women’s Front (AFŠ—Antifašistički front žena), launched by the Yugoslav CP in 1942 (in the middle of the Liberation War), presented such an orthodox position: “Marxists have ascertained that the causes of the unequal position of women do not lie in their oppression by men, and that women do not constitute a uniform stratum; rather, their status is inextricably linked to the existence of class society based on the exploitation of man by man on the basis of private ownership. Hence the only way to achieve the emancipation of women [...] is by pursuing [...] the road to revolutionary struggle [in order] to topple the class social system.”<sup>15</sup> This statement was issued at a time when we in Yugoslavia lived in a period of high socialism, enjoying sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll and wearing original Levi’s jeans. If the Communist Party (in Yugoslavia and elsewhere) emancipated women in many ways, by uprooting illiteracy, improving medical conditions and the child-care system, through paid maternity leave and the right to decide about pregnancy, then in due course it became necessary, as some local feminists saw, to “emancipate the emancipator.” This proved not to be easy.

12 — Monika Gibas, “‘Venus von Sternestädchen’: Walentina Tereschkova, Heldin der Moderne in der DDR” (“Venus from Star City: Valentina Tereškova, Heroine of the Modern in the GDR”), in *Sozialistische Helden: Eine Kulturgeschichte von Propagandafiguren in Osteuropa und der DDR (Socialist Heroes: A Cultural History of Propaganda Figures in Eastern Europe and the GDR)*, eds. Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries (Berlin: C. Links Verlag, 2002), 147. See also Sue Bridger, “The Cold War and the Cosmos: Valentina Tereshkova and the First Woman’s Space Flight,” in *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, eds. Melanie Ilić, Susan E. Reid, and Lynne Attwood (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 222–237.

13 — Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, “Introduction,” in *Reproducing*

*Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5–6.

14 — Lela Gafrindashvili, “Mother’s Question and/or Women’s Question,” in *Gender, Culture and Modernity* (Tbilisi, 2005). This anthology exists only in the Georgian language.

15 — Vida Tomšič, “Komunistička partija Jugoslavije u borbi za emancipaciju žena” (“The Yugoslav Communist Party’s Struggle for Women’s Emancipation”) [1978], reprinted in *Tito: četrdeset godina na čelu SKJ, 1937–1977 (Tito: Forty Years as Head of the Yugoslav CP, 1937–1977)* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1980), 336.

In October 1978, the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) in Belgrade, which functioned as an institute of contemporary art, organized the first international feminist conference ever held in a communist country: “Drug-ca Žena: Žensko Pitanje – Novi Pristup?” (“Comrade Woman: The Women’s Question – A New Approach?”). This was a two-day meeting of feminists from the West and East (Christine Delphy, Parveen Adams, Alice Schwarzer, Dacia Maraini, Ewa Morawska, to name just a few), and it was a rather intensive confrontation between Yugoslav and Western participants. The latter could not trust that a feminist conference held in a communist state could be—as it was—an independent event without the Party’s involvement. Yugoslav participants had a specific goal, as philosopher Rada Iveković stated: “[W]e had to define ourselves toward the dominant self-management, vaguely ‘Marxist’ (although ‘soft’) ideology, and to theorize the inclusion/exclusion of women therefrom, and the gender-blindness of that theory.”<sup>16</sup> This conference had been heavily attacked by the official Party women’s organizations for “importing capitalist ideology” into Yugoslavia, often called “socialism with a friendly face.” In Yugoslavia, as one of the organizers, Žarana Papić, commented, “We did not have a feminist movement, but we had feminists.”<sup>17</sup> What this meeting touched upon was also a sphere that usually escapes the attention of Marxist and socialist theory. It is clear in a slogan uttered during the conference—which I borrowed for the title of this text, and which rephrased the last sentence from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). It read: “PROLETARIANS OF ALL COUNTRIES, WHO WASHES YOUR SOCKS?”<sup>18</sup>

At stake was the domestic sphere. There is hardly a publication dealing with gender regimes in Eastern Europe which does not

discuss the dichotomy between the public and private/domestic spheres. After World War II, the new communist states tried hard to rephrase gender regimes that they inherited from the capitalist, that is, pre-communist, period. This rejection of the gender arrangements characteristic of the “old, bourgeois/capitalist world” became an even more urgent issue given that the alleged abolition of the public/private duality in state socialism was performed parallel to the Cold War, during which socialist states felt constantly threatened by “really existing capitalism.” Today, many feminist scholars who struggle with definitions of public/private in the communist setting usually posit this division as “public patriarchy” (the state) versus “private patriarchy” (the family). Even so, in the literature we often encounter the privileging of the domestic sphere, since it was claimed to be the only secure zone which was outside the reach of the state and thus could “resist socialism.”<sup>19</sup>

In her critique of the celebration of the home as a site of resistance, Joanne P. Sharp contends: “[T]he homeplace image should not be overly romanticized [. . .] That the family symbolised free space, in contrast to the state, tended to deflect attention away from patriarchal relations operating within the family. The binary family/state meant that women who criticized the family were interpreted as being on the side of the state.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, a closer inspection of this “secure zone” may prove that the power relations practiced “at home” often as not implied women’s subjugation and sometimes even domestic violence against both women and children. None of the socialist states passed laws against these acts, since they were considered to belong to the citizens’ “private” sphere.

Susan Gal and Gail Kligman reveal yet another domain in which the public/private distinction was made, the opposition culture:

*For example, dissident writers (in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland) constructed a ‘public’ inside the household as an implicitly male realm in which men could exercise*

16 — Rada Iveković, interview in Brüche. *Geschlecht. Gesellschaft: Gender Studies zwischen Ost und West* (Ruptures. *Gender. Society: Gender Studies Between East and West*), eds. Alice Pechriggl and Marlen Bidwell-Steiner (Vienna: Bundesministerium für Förderung von Frauen in der Wissenschaft, 2003), 31.

17 — Žarana Papić, “Women’s Movement in Former Yugoslavia: 1970s and 1980s,” in *What Can We Do for Ourselves? East European Feminist Conference* (Belgrade: Center for Women’s Studies, 1994), 19–22. For more about the conference, see the master’s thesis by Chiara Bonfiglioli, “Belgrade 1978: Remembering the Conference ‘Drug-ca Žena: Žensko Pitanje – Novi Pristup?’ / ‘Comrade Woman: The Women’s Question – A New Approach?’ Thirty Years Later” (Utrecht University, 2008). The full text is available at: <http://www.cunterview.net/index.php/Theory-Papers/Chiara-Bonfiglioli-Comrade-Women.html>.

18 — Quoted by Rada Iveković, “Pravo na razliku? Paritet, kvote, da ili ne? Naputak o metodi” (“Difference and Its Meaning? Parity, Quotas, Yes or No? Observations on Method”), *Ženske studije*, no. 5–6 (1996): 7.

19 — See, among others, Katherine Verdery, “From Parent-State to Family Patriarchs: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 8, no. 2 (March 1994): 225–256; Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market* (London: Verso, 1993); Magda Mueller and Nanette Funk, eds., *Gender Politics and Post-Communism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 320–323.

20 — Joanne P. Sharp, “Women, Nationalism and Citizenship in Post-Communist Europe,” in *Private Views: Spaces and Gender in Contemporary Art from Britain and Estonia*, eds. Angela Dimitrakaki, Pam Skelton, and Mare Traill (London: Women’s Art Library, 2000), 102–103.

political authority and imagination. This may be viewed as a discursive move to reclaim for men a patriarchal authority over the household that the state had in many ways usurped. But this newly defined (domestic) public was a realm made possible by the private dimension of the divided household, where the work of women was indispensable as a support not only for the material well-being of its members but also for their political engagement. Women's work was made invisible because it was doubly privatized as the household (private) was split into political activities (public) and basic maintenance.<sup>21</sup>

This observation proffers a non-romantic view of dissident circles: in resisting the oppressive state, they nevertheless carried on time-honored gender relations.

[...]

### Capital and Gender

*If you had behaved nicely,  
the communists wouldn't exist.*

— Jenny Holzer<sup>22</sup>

*Capital and Gender* was an international public art project staged in a shopping mall in Skopje and curated by Suzana Milevska in 2001.<sup>23</sup> It serves here to introduce an important aspect of the economic and political transformations of the former communist East. In the early 1990s, radical changes swept through the social tissue, primarily because the (re-)turn to a capitalist mode of production initially caused general unemployment (and women's unemployment, in particular) and societal paucity, parallel to which was the inception of a "free" post-communist media landscape. Maria Todorova tells of an indicative reaction to the situation. Answering a question about the role of women in that struggle, Yelena Bonner, a radical democratic leader, said in 1990 that Russians could not afford to speak of "us men" and "us women" because the economic condition in the country was indeed so disastrous that all "share a common struggle for democracy, a struggle to feed the country."

Commenting on this position, which implies—once again—a "genderless struggle," Todorova elaborates on the relationship be-

tween feminism and post-communist democracy, maintaining that such a view carries an illusion, as it "postulates that feminism can develop only when economic and social stability have been established." She also remarks that in this hierarchy, feminism is posited "apart from democracy," which is not yet "ripe" for feminism. This brings yet a second false presumption, Todorova argues: "The illusion is that once democracy is achieved, women, as part of the body politic, will automatically benefit. This framework recalls classical socialist theory: once socialism is installed, it is said, women will be automatically emancipated."<sup>24</sup>

If we assume—for a while—that democracy, like feminism, presupposes stability, how are we to explain that under the condition of full societal instability, the political empowerment in Eastern European states brought about an immediate concern for the preservation of "life" (and Nation), in the form of negating women's rights over their own bodies, which had been accorded to women in state socialism (Romania being an exception)?

Hungarian feminist Yudit Kiss says: "It is rather telling that one of the first big discussions of the newly elected [Hungarian] parliament took place about a draft law to ban abortion. It is rather intriguing that in the middle of a deep economic crisis, political chaos and social insecurity, when the very foundations of society are to be reshaped, abortion has become a primary question in almost all post-socialist countries."<sup>25</sup>

Referring to her private conversation about abortion with a member of the Polish Senate in 1991, Peggy Watson quotes him: "We will nationalize those bellies!" ("*Uspołecznimy te brzuchy!*") Indeed, the abortion law in Poland was enacted in January 1993. Watson argues that this particular legislation was regarded as something that could be done: "[T]he regulation of women was seen as an area which required action but also one where power could be readily exercised, whereas the economy engendered feelings of powerlessness."<sup>26</sup> Certainly these critiques do not target the very idea of the democratic project, but point to the contradictions and power relations enmeshed in its functioning.

24 — Maria Todorova, "The Bulgarian Case: Women's Issues or Feminist Issues," in Mueller and Funk, eds., *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*, 30.

25 — Yudit Kiss [1991], cited in Peggy Watson, "The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe," in *Mapping the Women's Movement*, ed. Monica Threlfall (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 221.

26 — Watson, "The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe," 221.

21 — Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 52.

22 — Jenny Holzer, cited in Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 20.

23 — See Suzana Milevska, ed., *Capital and Gender* (Skopje: Museum of the City of Skopje, 2001).



As soon as the post-communist states were (re-)founded in the early 1990s, nationalism became an integral part of the newly gained statehood. Observing this process in Serbia, Belgrade feminist sociologist Žarana Papić wrote in 1994 about the shift “from State Socialism to State Nationalism.”<sup>27</sup> The “Nation” (far less often than democracy or restoration of human rights) was on the agenda of all political parties who ran for seats in newly democratic parliaments. Back in the early 1990s, two words were on everyone’s lips. The first was “victimhood,” a lament maintaining that “Our Nation” had always been subjugated to “evil history” in which “Sovietization” was just the latest instance. The other was the word “difference,” which primarily meant national differences: in the post-communist “ethnically clean democracies”—in feminist accounts known as “democracies with the male face”—“Our Nation” was/is imagined as unique and essentially different from any other nation in Europe (particularly from the neighboring nations, with which “Our Nation” may have been at war). This argument is today only slightly rephrased in light of European unification and the conditions of global capitalism. At present, twenty-year-old “new” democracies still manifest real difficulties in coping with “differences,” touching on rights of social, sexual, and ethnic minorities in both democratic life and art contexts.<sup>28</sup>

Part of these contradictions is post-communism’s relation to feminism. In state socialism, feminism was officially rejected as an “import” from the capitalist West (from where, in passing, we also imported the idea of communism). This attitude may have changed slightly over the past twenty years, but the truth is that none of the Eastern European post-communist societies have been able to consolidate any relevant leftist political party, and if so, this agent was (and to some extent still is) accused of restoring the “specter of communism.” Consequently, our freshly democratized societies do not actually endure any left-oriented thinking or

practice, such as critique of nationalism, feminism, gay and lesbian rights activism, or even the anti-globalist movement. In an ironic twist, these are now imagined to be “imports” implemented from the “outside,” from the—democratic—West.

Without exaggeration, it could be said that since the early 1990s, contemporary art practice in Eastern Europe has provided the most radical critique of power and gender relations established in the “new” democracies. It was contemporary art that first touched upon themes that were made invisible in socialism, such as domestic violence, or that deconstructed the newly rephrased ideal of motherhood; art opened the issue of gay and lesbian identities, elements that were taboo in the previous regime. Many exhibitions (featuring both female and male artists) took place in Eastern European countries during the 1990s—in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Macedonia, and Russia—all informed by gender theories. And while it is rather easy to identify feminist orientations in recent art, it must also be said that not many women artists accept this label, as they find it “too restrictive.” This attitude may sound like *déjà vu*. Why?

If we keep with Foucault’s assessment, according to which power is not an oppressive but rather a productive force in society, we can ask whether the communist systems managed to generate feminist art. Well, the answer is no. During its entire existence, state socialism did not know feminist activism or an organized women’s movement. All the same, when we try today to rewrite the histories of art of many socialist countries, it appears that all over the region, there were scattered instances of resistance, namely pro-feminist or proto-feminist works. At least, this is what our *Gender Check* research has proven.

In her article on Slovak artist Jana Želibská (b. 1941), Zora Rusinová uses the best possible term, naming her practice “latent feminism.”<sup>29</sup> The case of Croatian Sanja Iveković is a bit different. She used to attend feminist seminars organized by Woman and Society, [a group of sociologists and philosophers] active in Zagreb in the late 1970s, and became well-informed in feminist theories. She was also conscious about Western feminist practices that she encountered either abroad or in the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, where these were presented

27 — See Žarana Papić, “From State Socialism to State Nationalism: The Case of Serbia in Gender Perspective,” *Refuge: Canada’s Periodical on Refugees*, no. 3 (June/July 1994): 10–14. The notion of state nationalism could be easily applied to many (if not all) post-communist states.

28 — See Margaret Tali, “Why have there not been any Russian artists in the contemporary art field in Estonia?,” in *Contemporary Art and Nationalism—Critical Reader*, eds. Minna Henriksson and Sezgin Boynik (Prishtina: Institute for Contemporary Art EXIT and Center for Humanistic Studies Gani Bobi, 2007), 90–96. See also Airi Triisberg, “Between Nation and People: On Concepts of (Un)Belonging,” in *Kristina Norman: After-War*, exh. cat., Estonian Pavilion at the 53rd Biennale di Venezia (Tallinn: Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, 2009), 88–108.

29 — Zora Rusinová, “Totalitarian Period and Latent Feminism,” *Prisens—Central European Art Review*, no. 4 (2003): 5–11.

as of the mid-1970s. However, back in the 1970s, there was no feminist art criticism in Yugoslavia to follow her practice.

With these historical facts in mind, *Gender Check* cannot retrospectively reinvent feminist art because, until the early 1990s, there were very few artists whose work was informed by feminist consciousness. In addition, many women artists working in the 1960s and early 1970s would never agree that their gender had anything to do with their art. As many interviews gathered in our research manifest, women artists wanted to be recognized simply as “artists,” rejecting the idiom of “women’s art.” Indeed, “women’s art” (itself a problematic term) was not a ticket for joining “universal art.” After 1945, both Western and Eastern European art circles considered modernist/abstract art to be the “universal language.” East or West, the “universal” and modernist canon was based on the premise that high art “does not have a sex.” This conviction remained in effect even in the 1970s, when a greater number of women in Eastern Europe entered the art scene. Therefore, *Gender Check* cannot deal with the entire body of work of an artist, but with particular artworks which are exposed here to a gendered reading. It is true that our procedure does not (always) take into account the intention of the artists, be they male or female. What we do is not to search for artists who identified themselves as feminists or to ask whether their works impart feminist messages. *Gender Check* is concerned with the logic of interpretation.

Finally, it is perhaps necessary to clarify our reasons for initiating the *Gender Check* project that resulted in this exhibition. In the catalogue to the exhibition *7 Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow*, organized by the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana

in 2004, the curators—Zdenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel—explain their motivation for organizing such a project:

*Regardless of the considerable difference between the socialist societies, there are certain fundamental parameters that they all shared. These parameters shaped Yugoslav society as well, despite the distance it maintained from the system and culture of “really existing socialism.” Strict limitations on private property and on capitalist forms of production, the leading position of the Communist Party and its de facto identity with the state apparatus, direct ideological control of the public sphere (including the media, the educational system, cultural institutions, and so on), centralized programs of social welfare and health care—these were all features of the common socialist system. With regard to cultural distinctions, the differences have become progressively less significant since the collapse of communism, while the importance of the similarities and correspondences has grown.<sup>30</sup>*

Our *Gender Check* project follows this line of thinking in acknowledging that the (re)writing of art histories is not a geographically neutral maneuver. However, this maneuver cannot be gender neutral either.

Excerpted from *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*. Edited by Bojana Pejić. Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien; Cologne: Walther König, 2010.

30 — Zdenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel, “Seven Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow,” in *7 Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow* (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 8.

## After Perestroika: Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen

MARGARITA TUPITSYN

[...]

In *Femininity and Domination*, Sandra Lee Bartky writes: “Coming to have a feminist consciousness is the experience of coming to see things about oneself and one’s society that were heretofore hidden. This experience, the acquiring of a ‘raised’ consciousness, in spite of its disturbing aspects, is an immeasurable advance over

the false consciousness which it replaces.”<sup>1</sup> After *Perestroika* is not about women’s art so much as it is about the rise of a feminist consciousness such as Bartky describes. This consciousness has surfaced in the perestroika-era work of

1 — Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 21.

both male and female artists, who attempt to begin to articulate a theory of socialist patriarchy not unlike the discourse of Western feminism on capitalist patriarchy.

Soon after the October Revolution, Lenin commanded that “in the land of the Soviets, every kitchenmaid must be able to rule the state.” Yet in 1922, Aleksandra Kollontai observed that “the Soviet state was run by men, and women were to be found only in subordinate positions.”<sup>2</sup> Lenin’s postulate was widely quoted in propaganda materials, of which an anonymous poster from the mid-1920s, *Lenin and the Female Worker* (“Every Kitchenmaid Must Be Able to Rule the State”), is representative. The poster depicts a smiling, kerchiefed woman with an illustrated chart in her hands. The chart tells the viewer about women’s increased roles in various realms of Soviet life. From these statistics one learns that the highest position given to females is Party membership; one hardly finds any mention of their role in the Bolshevik government. Other dicta of Lenin included in the chart specifically stress the role of “the second sex” in the productive sector. During the revolutionary period, women were also actively recruited in Soviet campaigns of propaganda and agitation desperately needed due to the grand scale of the new country and the vast uneducated population. But their position in society, like that of the revolutionary artists (whose art was also used for propaganda purposes), declined drastically by the early 1930s, when the Bolsheviks gained a stable power base. Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising that one finds the most liberating female images in work of an agitational nature produced at the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s, primarily in conjunction with the events of the First Five-Year Plan. In order to better serve propaganda needs at that time, most radical Soviet artists shifted to the production of photomontages, posters, and photographs, a large number of which represented women workers involved in efforts to realize Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan. Although these mass-produced images advertised working women as the equals of men, they nevertheless fulfilled the condition outlined by Hélène Cixous, who wrote, “When a woman is asked to take part in this representation she is, of course, asked to represent man’s desire.”<sup>3</sup> In

posters like *Lenin and the Female Worker* (“Every Kitchenmaid Must Be Able to Rule the State”), the leader’s rhetoric “asserts the primacy of the masculine term,” and in later Five-Year-Plan images, women participate in the representation of Stalin’s desire for nationwide industrialization. For example, Gustav Klutsis and Natalia Pinus’s poster *Women on Collective Farms Are a Substantial Power* (1933) shows two female collective farmers, one on a tractor and another mowing, under the patriarchal gaze of Stalin, who stands between them. Here the male leader is the ultimate referent of the women’s effort and accomplishment. In general, women’s place vis-à-vis the leader took on a similarity to the position, in the Christian tradition, of women as Christ’s brides. For example, Georgii Zelma’s photograph of an Eastern marriage, *In a City Hall* (1925), in which the bride is traditionally and heavily veiled, and his documentation of a woman dispensing with her veil, *Down with “Paranja”* (1925), do not signify a process of liberation from male ownership but rather a woman’s symbolic marriage to an ultimate husband—the leader for whom her face from now on is bared.

Michel Foucault argued that what is “true” depends on who controls discourse, and in the 1930s, Stalin’s domination of cultural discourse trapped women inside a male “truth.” In the period of Socialist Realism, female imagery, like all the genre’s other iconographical elements, was subjected to the strictest control and stereotyping. Shown primarily as heroines performing for the collective or as idealized mothers and workers, the Socialist Realist representation of women illustrated them as ultimately happy human beings, unflinching ready to serve the state’s objectives. Such masculine screening of the representation of women in mass culture narrowed women’s choices in life and forced them to identify with tightly controlled models of female behavior. Manifestations of feminine weakness were expelled from the pictorial language, except in representations of leaders’ public appearances, where women could permissibly be depicted as overcome with justified emotion. The politically charged signification of Socialist Realism’s narratives excluded any ambiguity of meaning. Women were shown in a state of emotional uncertainty only in those instances where they were obviously awaiting the return of husbands who were fighting for country and leader.

As a result of this monolithic masculine model of the world, by the time of the thaw

2 — Quoted in Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 327.

3 — Quoted in Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernists,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Post Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 75.

during Khrushchev's regime, official and unofficial women artists had inherited what can be called the patriarchal unconscious. Soviet women artists adhered to the idea that, in order to speak, they had to assume a masculine position; thus, almost invariably, they met any attempt to analyze their work from a feminist point of view with unconcealed skepticism or indifference.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, the negative status of feminism had already been reached, if not caused, because legendary Soviet feminists such as Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and Inessa Armand had been instrumental in the promotion of political propaganda that contributed to the success of Bolshevism's patriarchy and its despotic machine. Hence their feminist ideas provided scant inspiration to the community of post-Stalin female intellectuals who were largely opposed to the government. Moreover, the imposition of communal living inaugurated after the Revolution had corroded the sisterhood among women that existed earlier and led to the creation of the "New Woman" who, because of the adversative atmosphere of communal living (arising from crowded conditions and absence of privacy), often felt compelled to alienate herself from female neighbors.<sup>5</sup> In addition, due to censorship, women in the Soviet Union were deprived of any literature that reflected the discourse and politics of gender as they were developing in the West.

Beginning with propagandistic material produced for the First Five-Year Plan, mass-media representations of women's activities oscillated between depictions of joyful labor and images of cheerful motherhood, which stood in sharp contrast to the destructive reality and misery of the communal ghetto that women confronted on a daily basis. Today, when the failure of Soviet propaganda's false promise of feminist utopia is exposed, a number of artists are attempting to unravel the heritage of heroic mass-media imagery and to rethink its meaning and function. Andrei Roiter and Georgii Guryanov search the popular magazines of the Stalin era (which began with the First Five-Year Plan in 1928 and ended in 1953) for mass-media images of women to incorporate in their work. Guryanov re-sexualizes

black-and-white photographic compositions of asexual female workers when he duplicates them in vividly colored canvases. He comments on the exclusion of the suggestion of sexuality from the mass-media propaganda portrayals of industrialization that led ultimately to Stalin's self-serving increase of productivity. By contrast, Roiter preserves the grayish aura of old magazine illustrations when he covers photocopies of them with a layer of varnish, or re-creates on canvas the images borrowed from the fading photographs. In these works, Roiter illustrates how the Soviet establishment continuously produced images that effectively promoted an imaginary social paradise for women's labor and leisure.

Ilya Kabakov, whose installations deal with various aspects of communal living and reflect on "communal mentality," comments on the gender structure within that environment. He explains: "No one [in a communal apartment] hammers nails into boards or repairs faucets, because all these functions are performed by 'it' [the Russian neuter pronoun *ono*]. When a lightbulb burns out or a wallboard in the hallway rots through, the only recourse is to apply to the housing committee."<sup>6</sup> The maintenance board is run by the almighty *ono*, the androgyne, the ultimate Other, responsible for the function (or, rather, dysfunction) of Soviet society. The ironic reference to androgyny as an alternative to sexual difference may be explained as the result of the state's treatment of the population as a genderless body without organs; all deviations from this model were unacceptable. The four panels in Kabakov's series *Four Essences: Production, State, Love and Art* (1983) are imitations of the *stengazeta* (the maintenance board's newsletter). Magazine spreads, color plates, postcards, and photographs of all kinds of historical and contemporary significance cover the panels. Quotations from official speeches and poems appropriated from Stalinist rhetoric accompany the images. This is the anonymous production of neither male nor female origin.

Elena Elagina draws the viewers' attention to a neuter (rather than male or female) gender by often naming her works in the neuter. Like Kabakov, she promotes the idea that neither sex is the more powerful in the Soviet Union. The sources of Kabakov's and Elagina's models of androgyny may be found in some representations produced for the First Five-Year Plan,

4 — This position surfaces in various statements by contemporary Soviet female artists who maintain that art is a male profession and who seem to regard themselves more as men than women, or at least as some version of St. Thomas Aquinas's "imperfect man."

5 — Because of the prolonged period of communal living experienced in the 20th century by Soviet citizens, there is no equivalent in the Russian language for the English word "privacy."

6 — Victor Tupitsyn, "From the Communal Kitchen: A Conversation with Ilya Kabakov," *Arts Magazine*, October 1991, p. 52.

specifically in Klutsis's poster design *We Will Build Our Own New World* (1929), celebrating the Sixteenth Party Congress, and in El Lissitzky's poster for the *Exhibition of Soviet Art* (1929) in Zurich. Both show two faces, one male and one female, merging into each other by the sharing of an eye. Such merging of a male and a female into an androgynous or "interindividual" being may be a metaphor for the birth of the "third person" [ono] who would run the "New World."

Elagina's installations made of industrial and household paraphernalia suggest that the key to women's liberation and equality with men lies in women's denial of "woman-ness" and in the commitment to arduous work, both at home and in society. Elagina's work comments on the fact that although the reality of Soviet womanhood before perestroika was squalid and lacking in everyday necessities, it was hypocritically promoted in the media as a positive experience.

Larisa Zvezdochetova is drawn to objects taken from the popular culture of her childhood, specifically those found in the decor of the dismal communal apartments of the 1950s and 1960s, including cheap mass-produced carpets, embroideries, and textiles. Placed on the walls of private rooms which separated neighbors in communal apartments, thus removing them from the antagonistic commotion of a shared kitchen, these objects came to embody private fantasies and desires suppressed by the pillory of the "law of the commune." Similarly, Kabakov's *Sign up for the Mona Lisa at Prokhorova's (Room #24)* (1980, not included in [the *After Perestroika*] exhibition) takes us beyond the communal corridor into the room where everyone can "sign up" for a separate "reverie" (the image of the Mona Lisa serves as a metaphor of such), and thus be liberated from the oppression of collective aspirations.

Kabakov's folding-screen album *Olga Georgievna, Something Is Boiling* (1984), and *The Peppers'* jars of pickled and preserved fruits and vegetables bring us close to the reality of a communal kitchen. Kabakov records its facts through documentary photographs accompanied by dialogues and chains of narrative. Annoyingly endless phrases uttered by the apartment's tenants refer to the kitchen as the center of interaction, conflicts, and mutual surveillance.<sup>7</sup> The *Peppers'* installation with jars of

preserved food placed inside typical Soviet slippers turns two common objects into metaphors for gender behavior in the communal kitchen. The slippers symbolize men returning from work only to quietly avoid interaction with other tenants; the jars allude to women returning from work and plunging into the kitchen to realize grand projects of food preservation motivated by fear of future shortages.

The title of Elagina's installation, *PRE (Wonderful)* (1990)—*pre* refers to the adjective *prekrasnoe* ("wonderful")—is an ironic expression of women's dissatisfaction with their domestic realities. In this work, consisting of three white letters, two red pots, and a red shelf, Elagina creates a subtle interaction between visual and verbal elements. The literal meaning of *krasnoe*, from which the adjective *prekrasnoe* is formed, is "red." Thus the viewer looking at this installation first reads "*pre*" and then sees red household objects which complete the word "wonderful" through visual rather than verbal means. By means of this clever formal play, Elagina also reminds us of the ideological significance of the color red which, throughout Soviet history, has served as powerful "decor" for official ideology. Elagina's installation announces a woman's uncomfortable feeling about domestic reality by using the interrupted adjective, and resolves that discomfort by introducing the color red, a habitual compensator for all ideological gaps and inconsistencies.

Like Elagina, Maria Serebriakova wants to expose the constantly ignored burdens that stem primarily from chronic shortages in every aspect of women's lives. Serebriakova places pins over subtle drawings of hands making cookies that evoke representations of working hands popular in photographs from the era of the First Five-Year Plan. The joyful spirit of labor, which those historical images attempt to convey, here turns instead into a sado-masochistic impression (conveyed by the pins) of the repetitive rituals of cooking and washing. Serebriakova's drawings and collages, which advertise "elegant, convenient, useful" objects to Soviet women, fantasize about women as happy consumers, a status that to this day remains unattainable.

Elagina also collaborates with her husband, Igor Makarevich. Such teamwork between male and female artists has been a convention in Russia since the early twentieth century. At that time, the avant-garde artists Natalia Goncharova, Olga Rozanova, and Varvara Stepanova, by collaborating with their husbands, involved them in such traditionally

7 — Kabakov's mother's letters, which were exhibited as part of the installation *He Lost His Mind, Undressed, Ran Away Naked*, present an important document of the life of a single mother (Kabakov's father was killed during the Second World War).

female practices as textile and costume design. After the Revolution, these media (more often than painting and sculpture) symbolized the artist's radical position in society and culture. Interrupted by Stalin's suppression of the politics of gender, this tradition was resurrected during the Khrushchevian thaw of the late 1950s. At that time, collaboration with a man (or having one as a spouse so that he became an automatic supporter of female creativity) seemed to be the first step toward the rebirth of an alternative to Socialist Realist women's practices in art.

Elagina and Makarevich's installation *At the Source of Life* (1991) critiques women's position in the Soviet scientific establishment. It includes a portrait of the Stalin-era biologist Olga Lepishinskaia, framed by two photographs that show women participating in scientific research and school girls learning "true science" from Lepishinskaia. Lepishinskaia's mouth holds a plastic tube, which is connected to a bowl of water placed on a table nearby. By submitting the "mad" scientist herself to a mocking experiment, Elagina and Makarevich comment on the fact that, because science was as politicized as any other sphere of Soviet life, the research produced by people like Lepishinskaia was entirely senseless and served only to satisfy Stalin's infinite hunger for mythologizing.

Like Elagina and Makarevich's installation, *The Peppers' Handkerchief Painting #2* (1991) undercuts the phoniness of Soviet science, which often sacrificed truth for the sake of ideology. Here a female lecturer uses as her object for instruction *The Peppers'* familiar jar of preserved vegetables covered with a top ornamented by fake formulas. In other work, *The Peppers* attack the shocking conditions of Soviet medical practice. For their plywood panels addressing the issues of gynecology, they borrow medical descriptions of various gynecological conditions from outdated scientific books still in use in current medical practice. *Data Concerning Discharge as Related to the Degree of Vaginal Cleanliness According to Hermin* (1989) bears a chart with gynecological data, including descriptions of the "exterior appearance of discharge" or the "condition of the sexual organ." Enamelware lids cover some parts of the chart, and the chart also depicts a grinning and fragmented face. The panel in turn connects to a stool with a hollow in which there is a plastic duck's head. The installation may be viewed as a metaphor for abortion and its devastating effect on Soviet women, who

are not only deprived of contraceptives but also subjected to inhuman medical treatment without the benefit of anesthesia.

The Peppers' examination of gynecological issues indirectly brings us to the broader issue of sexuality in Soviet culture. For example, shortly after the Revolution there were liberal laws concerning homosexuality; later, under Stalin's regime, the framework of sexual behavior was strictly defined, and any deviations from it were subjected to harsh criticism.<sup>8</sup> Ideologists like Andrei Zhdanov promoted an "antisexual aesthetic," the purging from Soviet culture of signs of sexual deviance and the repression of any public manifestations of "frivolous" behavior that might be in conflict with true revolutionary spirit. An anti-Freudian campaign and a general bashing of psychoanalysis paralleled this attitude.<sup>9</sup> The Victorian echo which reverberates in this anti-sexual politics allows us to assume, as did Foucault, that "if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative."<sup>10</sup> This was indeed the essence of the work ethic imposed by the Communist Party at the time of the great industrialist projects.<sup>11</sup>

Komar and Melamid's *Girl in Front of a Mirror* (1981–82) and Leonid Sokov's *Stalin and Marilyn* (1986) offer scenarios of what was happening behind the curtain of the anti-sexual campaign. Sokov depicts Stalin and Marilyn Monroe in an amorous embrace, creating a sharp contrast to familiar official representations of the leader as a superhuman who lacked human desires. The work exposes Soviet leaders' secret admiration for Western objects of sexual desire and in general reminds the viewer about incidents of apparatchiks' promiscuous behavior that

8 — According to Timur Novikov, before Stalin's regime, Soviet marriage bureaus registered couples of the same sex. He claims that a Soviet encyclopedia of the period explained that because "in bourgeois countries (and in Russia before the Revolution) homosexuals and lesbians suffered and were very unhappy people, so in our country all the necessary conditions for living were created for them." Quoted from Victor and Margarita Tupitsyn, "Timur and Afrika," *Flash Art*, no. 151 (March/April 1990), p. 123.

9 — It is interesting that until recently the Soviet intelligentsia treated psychoanalysis with great suspicion primarily because of its association with Freud. Thus one can say that the official bashing of psychoanalysis had an impact even on alternative communities.

10 — Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 6.

11 — Victor and Margarita Tupitsyn, "Timur and Afrika," p. 123. Curiously, Afrika suggests that such strict control of sexual behavior "gave birth to 'peculiar' forms of sexuality.

One person expressed his sexual attraction to another person by reporting him to the authorities, thereby (sadistically) condemning the object of his affections to suffering.

This was a form of satisfaction." Afrika's suggestions may help to explain why so many people "enjoyed" acting as informers.

were carefully hidden from the public.<sup>12</sup> Komar and Melamid's *Girl in Front of a Mirror* depicts a Pioneer girl in a uniform who sits in front of a mirror, masturbating. The latter act, presented with Balthusian evasiveness, alludes to the presence of hidden erotic connotations in many Socialist Realist canvases.

Sokov's choice of Marilyn Monroe as the object of desire for the Soviet leader is significant vis-à-vis the representation of female images in Soviet mass culture. Soviet women, whose lives were depleted by the hostile relationships engendered by communal living and by the patriarchal, ideological surveillance of their outside work, often became asexual disciplinarians. Timur Novikov's *Woman with a Whip* (1988) (which is reminiscent of Masoch's Wanda in *Venus in Furs*) communicates his fear as well as ridicule of precisely such a woman. But by executing *Woman with a Whip* in fabric, Novikov softens and neutralizes the image of female authority.

Svetlana Kopystiansky, Maria Konstantinova, and Irina Nakhova, as well as Novikov, initiate a discourse on "feminine Otherness." Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out that this discourse "heightens awareness of the radical alienation of women from language and, indeed, from all the symbolic systems in which a culture's reality is represented."<sup>13</sup> Thus these artists attempt to depart from masculine imagery and language, "the 'alien point of view' that women have historically accepted."<sup>14</sup> Novikov explores the femininity of the work of art by giving up traditional tools such as canvas, palette knife, and oil paint. Instead he shops for locally produced textiles, sews various pieces together, and makes subtle drawings or applies photographs on them. Kopystiansky directs deconstructive strategies toward the annals of Russian literature dominated by male creators. She adopts fragments of various literary texts and inscribes them on pieces of canvas or on landscapes, a favorite genre of the paternalist tradition of Russian culture. She inscribes some of the canvases with writings that she later crumples up, thus obtaining a distortion of the text as a symbol of the masculine power of speech. Furthermore, the crumpling of the

canvas contributes to the appearance on it of vaginal folds, which thus begin to absorb and devour the text.

Konstantinova's series of fabric objects provides an example of feminist critique directed at visual icons of Soviet culture. Whether she transforms Kazimir Malevich's landmark painting *Black Square* into a cushion in *M. K. K. M.* (1989) (a play on the two artists' initials) or turns a potent, hard-edged Soviet red star into a floppy impotent object in *Rest in Peace* (1989), she points to the end of imperial Soviet thinking and the death of patriarchal authority, whether it arises from aesthetic or political totalitarianism.

For a long time Irina Nakhova was the only woman artist in the male community of conceptual artists. Her shift from painting to installations in 1984 was met by her male colleagues with particular interest. The project consisted of four successive installations placed in her living quarters and called *Rooms*. In each of them Nakhova covered the walls, the ceiling, and the floor with cutouts (ranging from abstract shapes to various reproductions from popular magazines) and changed the lighting to create unexpected visual effects. The idea was to transgress the limits of the two-dimensionality of painting and to place a domestic viewer within the picture in order to expose her or him (so little accustomed to experiences other than verbal ones) to an avalanche of visual information. Ironically, the project acquired a rather different context when the critic Joseph Bakshtein volunteered to guide visitors (without Nakhova's participation) and record their reflections upon the "rooms."<sup>15</sup> However, Bakshtein limited the list of commentators to twelve male artists, who thus became an integral part of the project's function after its execution. His experiment demonstrated how visual experience can ferment into a chain of narratives and allegorical constructs, proving that the control of Soviet conceptualism's interpretive strategies belonged to the "alien point of view."

Most of the work produced by Nakhova since perestroika responds not so much to specific aspects of Soviet culture as to culture per se. The artist views the latter as a mine of masculine knowledge-production which she dislocates and de-contextualizes. In *Camping* (1990) she skillfully paints classical images of

12 — There are many stories about the outrageous behavior of Soviet apparatchiks. One of them describes how Lavrentii Beria (Stalin's chief of the KGB) ordered girls he saw passing by his window to be brought to him.

13 — Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 239.

14 — Ibid.

15 — These were later documented in a self-published book, *Rooms*, compiled by the Moscow NOMA (conceptual circle) in 1985. In the book the artists discuss and document with photographs various issues surrounding their living and working conditions.



gods and goddesses on the canvas surfaces of worn-out and ripped cots. Here Nakhova undermines the heritage of high-culture imagery by clashing it with the low standards of Soviet popular artifacts.

Among the distinguishing features of Gorbachev's rule was the fact that, unlike previous leaders, he demonstrated an unusual indifference toward the monuments of his predecessors and instead of erecting new ones glorifying himself,<sup>16</sup> dismantled the Berlin Wall and became involved in the disarmament campaign. As a result, for the first time since the Revolution, a Soviet leader gave up "vertical mental images" and in general avoided the phallogocentric path of monument-making of which the most grotesque example is a huge rocket erected near the VDNKh (the Permanent Exhibition of Agricultural and Industrial Achievements) subway station in Moscow. According to Vitaly Komar, this monument (given its explicit phallic shape) is referred to among the population as "the dream of an impotent." Neighboring this rocket is perhaps one of the most famous Soviet monuments—*Worker and Female Collective Farmer*, a sculpture by Vera Mukhina. Like Klutsis's and Lissitzky's double representation of a male and a female mentioned earlier, this work also epitomizes the merging of the two genders—not, however, through their physical fusion but because the male worker holds aloft a hammer, and the female collective farmer a sickle. In this way Mukhina seems to suggest that differentiation between the two genders would result in the destruction of this prime Soviet icon. Afrika's *Birth of Agent* (1990), a photograph of Mukhina's sculpture printed on textile, alongside a medical drawing of a Caesarean section, announces the end of the Soviet paradigm of gender unification in general and Mukhina's in particular. The Caesarean section is a metaphor of the rather painful birth of a discourse on sexual difference and the proclamation of the voice of the second sex.

Like Afrika's treatment of Mukhina's sculpture, Oleg Vassilyev's two lithographs dismantle the myth of Lenin's slogan, "Every kitchenmaid must be able to rule the state." If the anonymous poster of the 1920s discussed earlier possessed an iconographic and semantic clarity, Vassilyev's lithographs are composed from overlaid images and fragments of ideological texts which

together create a field of contradictory meanings. These works testify to the gross failure of Lenin's assumption that women can be only kitchenmaids or stateswomen. This enforced viewing of official positions as the high point of achievement, and the relegation of the kitchen to the bottom of the hierarchy, forcefully predetermined the destiny of women in the Soviet Union and programmed every female to strive toward goals established by the state.

Vladislav Mamyshev's impersonation of Marilyn Monroe is the most radical attack of conventional images of masculinity and femininity in Soviet culture. In his performances he employs Monroe's character not as an object of desire but as a metaphor for the weakness of his male identity. As he strolls through St. Petersburg's streets and squares in a female outfit and a wig, he performs shock therapy on the communal body of a Soviet population whose static mental images of gender roles have resisted change since the Bolsheviks defined them after the Revolution.

Ever since perestroika, the majority of Russian women still fail to recognize that they suffer domestic and/or political oppression. This makes it difficult to convert them into partisans of a feminist course. Even if we accept their claim to political and domestic equality, it is possible, as Sandra Lee Bartky reminds us, to be oppressed "in ways that need involve neither physical deprivation, legal inequality, nor economic exploitation; one can be oppressed psychologically. The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors."<sup>17</sup> This is precisely what happened to Soviet women before perestroika, and it is still the case today: they are unwilling to acknowledge manifestations of psychological oppression (which include stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification), and so they continue to serve as "their own oppressors."

Events at recent exhibitions dedicated to women's art reflect the lack of serious consideration given to women's issues by the majority of Russian men. For example, during *Visitation*, in March 1991, the male curator and some male artists decided to participate in the exhibition under female surnames, thus confusing and diminishing the issues of feminism at hand.<sup>18</sup>

17 — Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, p. 22.

18 — Another exhibition, *Hearts of the Four*, took place in the summer of 1992. Once again, the event was more of a playful nature than an attempt to analyze gender issues. It is curious that the most serious exhibition of women's art was the first one, *Female Worker*, in the fall of 1990. This was organized by the participants themselves, without a male curator.

16 — This was noted by Vitaly Komar during an informal lecture in his studio in 1992 about Soviet public sculpture.

This was once again proof of a refusal to acknowledge the difference between and separation of men and women, and proof, too, of a continued “merging” and “fusing” of genders which has become the symbol of failed Soviet feminism. On a broader level, this gesture profoundly illustrated the failure of most Russian intellectuals to recognize the multiplicity of ideologies beyond the old Soviet doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

19 — After I wrote this essay in December 1992, I went to Moscow thinking that the issues that I explored in it would by now be widely familiar in the art world. To my great surprise and discontent, however, I discovered that the state of affairs as far as “a feminist consciousness” is concerned has deteriorated in comparison to that of Gorbachev’s era. At that time, the complete

Excerpted from *After Perestroika: Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen*. New York: Independent Curators International, 1993.

dismantling of official and unofficial structures and hierarchy allowed women to believe that their voices could finally acquire a larger presence. After the coup, however, when new institutions began to be formed, women were once again dismissed to the peripheral positions, the most popular of which is serving tea at men’s meetings and discussions of artistic affairs. Another aspect of the Russian art world which struck me greatly was a continuous unwillingness on the part of most men and women alike to clean up language of most common sexist comments and expressions. Even female artists who had lived in the West for a while would allow themselves to say something like “why didn’t he ask the girls [who work for him] to take care of this matter?” Perhaps the most telling comment as far as the present status of women in society is concerned was a statement which I heard from one working woman. She said, “Russian women have learned how to do everything except how to resist men.”

## The East Side Story of (Gendered) Art: Framing Gender in Czech and Slovak Contemporary Art

ZUZANA ŠTEFKOVÁ

To narrate a history is always tricky, and so is my attempt to present the story of the past twenty-five years of gendering Czech and Slovak art. With any of the possible versions of the story, too much must be left out: training attention on certain events and their protagonists leads to the omission of others. Also, in speaking of events that one has lived through and sometimes even helped to shape, the (hi)story-teller risks becoming partisan: in order to avoid the Scylla of the “view from nowhere,” one faces the Charybdis of an excessively subjective perspective. Furthermore, there are other traps of history-telling typical of the genre: the lure of a narrative arc, the temptation of concluding with a climax, the tendency to neglect and discard fissures and ruptures, and to replace them with smooth cascades of causalities.

With these questions and issues in mind, my aim is to present this story as a contested field rather than a grand narrative. From among the many possible versions of the story, I have chosen one that demonstrates four different modes of framing the gender discourse in Czech and Slovak visual art since 1989.<sup>1</sup> The following text

chronicles the development of gendered terminology, the changing approach to art-making as a socially conditioned and gender-specific activity, and the representation of the gendered self of the artist in Czech and Slovak contexts. Another aim of this chapter is to offer an overview of different curatorial strategies that have helped to introduce gender-centered approaches into Czech and Slovak exhibition practice, and to instigate a gendered critique within the domain of visual art. Related to this is a focus on the institutional framing of gender as it manifests in gallery policies on one hand and art pedagogy on the other.

Of course, this theme is not a *tabula rasa*. There is abundant information regarding the topic, including exhibition catalogues as well as theoretical volumes and conference proceedings addressing gender in Czech contemporary art.<sup>2</sup> However, the majority of these texts have

My aim here is to underscore the interconnectedness of the Czech and Slovak art scenes that survives to this day, in spite of the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Even today, Czech and Slovak artists keep close ties—as demonstrated by the number of Slovak artists who study or teach at Czech art academies.

2 — See, for example, Martina Pachmanová, “The Muzzle: Gender and Sexual Politics in Contemporary Czech Art,” *ARTMargins*, December 15, 2001; Zuzana Štefková, “Obraz ženy přelomu tisíciletí ženský očima” (“Image of the Woman of the Turn of the Millennium Through Women’s Eyes”), *Umění* 51 (2003): 219–28; Milena Bartlová and Martina Pachmanová, eds., *Artemis a Faust*:

1 — While this volume [*Czech Feminisms: Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*] focuses primarily on gender in the Czech context, this [text] includes some examples of Slovak art.

been published in Czech or Slovak, making them essentially inaccessible to non-speakers. As the Czech art historian Martina Pachmanová notes in her seminal essay “In? Out? In Between?” save for a few token artists, the Western art world largely ignores post-socialist Eastern-bloc art dealing with gender. According to Pachmanová, the reason for this omission is that, from the Western perspective, Eastern Europe is “neither in nor out”: “It is similar, yet different, but not different enough to be in the position of the postcolonial ‘Other’ that is today an integral part of contemporary feminist and gender debates about art and visual culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Another reason for the underexposure of gender discourse in Eastern European art is the anthropological/sociological focus of local gender discourse. As Bojana Pejić observed in her preface to *Gender Check: A Reader*, research targeting gender in post-socialist countries has been primarily conducted from sociological and anthropological, rather than art theory, perspectives. At the same time, “the production of knowledge in the fields of art history and visual culture [continues to be] informed, for the most part, by a gender-neutral approach.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in the rare cases when information on gendered aspects of Eastern European art gets published, it often presents all of Eastern Europe and its art as a uniform, monolithic entity. While it is true that artists from the countries of the former Soviet bloc share common historical experiences, there are important differences among the individual countries, and hence the art produced in various locations. A good example of such difference would be the varying role that religion plays in art dealing with gender and sexuality across Eastern European countries. For example, in Poland, with the dominant place of the Catholic Church, artists frequently deploy religious symbols when addressing issues of sexuality, and their critique often focuses on the traditional, patriarchal gender role models championed by church authorities. By contrast, these kinds

of topics tend to be marginal in, for instance, Czech art. This should not surprise us given the fact that the Czech Republic is renowned for its self-proclaimed atheism. Seen from the outside, these distinctions might get overlooked, yet these specific social realities generate artistic responses that vary from state to state.

[...]

### Framing the Discourse: Asking Questions

The beginnings of gendered discourse in Czech art date back to a time long before the fall of the Iron Curtain. However, after an initial lively phase that coincided with activities of the feminist movement around the turn of the twentieth century and again during the interwar period,<sup>5</sup> the use of gendered, if not feminist, perspectives in art came to an abrupt halt, remaining dormant until its reintroduction in the 1990s. [As enumerated by Pachmanová,] there were many reasons for this silence: lack of information and dialogue with the West; lack of solidarity among women and of a collective effort to change; surviving domination of the modernist tradition and the notion of art as a category presumably transcending social and psychic processes; skepticism toward all “-isms” (regarded with suspicion and often denounced as the danger of a new “totality”); absolute mistrust of political art, discredited by the official propaganda of the communist regime; and, last but not least, sexism and misogyny, permeating all layers of society.<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean that there were no attempts to use a gender-specific approach to art prior to 1989, yet these rare examples engaging gender criteria did so in a way that avoided politicization of gender and bypassed contemporary Western feminist discourse. Gender aspects of art were treated as presumably “natural” outcomes of the artist’s sex, and its attributes discernible in art were seen as individual responses to one’s sensitivity or as a purely aesthetic problem.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, gendered per-

Ženy ve službách (*Artemis and Faust: Women at Service of Art History*), Prague: Academia, 2008; Petra Hánáková, *Ženy-instituce? K dějinám umělecké praxe devět desítek let* (*Women-Institutions? On the History of Art Practice in the Nineties*), Bratislava: Slovart, 2010; and Martin C. Putna, ed., *Homosexualita v dějinách českého umění (Homosexuality in the History of Czech Art)*, Prague: Academia, 2011.

3 — Martina Pachmanová, “In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory,” in *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić, Cologne: Walther König, 2009, 37.

4 — Bojana Pejić, ed., *Gender Check: Reader*, Cologne: Walther König, 2009, 15.

5 — Martina Pachmanová, *Neznámá území českého moderního umění: Pod lupou genderu (Unknown Territories of Czech Modern Art: Through the Looking Glass of Gender)*, Prague: Argo, 2004; Karla Huebner, “The Czech 1930s Through Toyen,” in *Czech Feminisms: Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*, eds. Iveta Jusová and Jiřina Šiklová, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.

6 — Martina Pachmanová, “Mlčení o feminizmu a ženskost jako výtvarná hodnota: České umělkyně očima Jindřicha Chalupského” (“Silence about Feminism and Femininity as an Aesthetic Value: Czech Women Artists Through the Eyes of Jindřich Chalupský,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny* 14 (2013): 35–37.

7 — This was particularly the case of Jindřich Chalupský, an influential Czech art critic and theorist, who saw gender as a relevant category in connection to Czech women artists but in a deliberately depoliticized way.

spective was reserved for women only. Without exception, art criticism presented art made by women as marked by their gender—unlike the art of men.

With the opening of Western borders after 1989, the Czech art scene saw the arrival of new discursive practices and the establishing of gender-sensitive theoretical frameworks. The term “gender” was not used in Czech writing about art until the end of the 1990s, yet already in 1993, *Visual Arts* magazine published a special issue dealing with art made by women. Among the various texts that it presented, this issue featured a survey focused on gender-related topics whose respondents were Czech women artists of several generations. The survey—polemically entitled *Women’s Art Does Not Exist*—delineated many of the topics driving the Czech gender discourse of the early 1990s. The survey questions addressed gender roles, examined the working conditions of women artists, identified characteristic traits of art made by women, and, for the first time in the Czech art-world context, attempted to use gender-specific terminology.

Without further specification or explanation, the author of the survey, art historian Věra Jirousová, used the expression “women’s art” in order to underline similarities in art produced by women. Yet the reception of the term was marked by doubt and suspicion. As the responses suggest, there was no consensus as to what the term actually meant. Some appeared to view the notion of “women’s art” as meaningless (for instance Zorka Ságlová, the author of the quote used in the survey’s title), or even as misleading and inappropriate. Irena Jůzová considered it “a convention that misuses a biological given matter . . . to gain attention or to stir interest in an inappropriate way,” while Martina Riedelbauchová declared that she pictures women’s art as “something really disgusting; some sort of lavender mustiness of crochets.”<sup>8</sup> Věra Janoušková connected the term with feminism, albeit in a way that was ultimately negative: “I have to admit I don’t like the term ‘women art.’ I am not a fan of feminism and the whole emancipation movement has led to the enslavement of women.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, Jana Žáčková championed the relevance of the notion for women artists: “Women’s art is something that relates directly

to her and says: I am here, I am a woman, I have a body and a soul.”<sup>10</sup>

Besides coining gender-specific terminology, the survey diverged from the then-dominant perception that viewed art as essentially divorced from the social realities of the artist. By posing the question, “Do you think a woman is as free in her work as a man, or do you perceive any concrete physical or social determination?”<sup>11</sup> Jirousová suggested that men and women artists might be influenced by their respective social conditions, which are invariably different. Still, the majority of respondents rejected any ties between social conditions and art. In the words of Jůzová: “There should be no external determinations in art.”<sup>12</sup> This statement reflected a belief in the autonomy of art that was not as much an outcome of some *a priori* formalist theoretical framework as it was a response to the experiences of the situation prior to 1989, in which nonconformist artists sought to keep their freedom and avoid control by the state regime.

Another opinion that the respondents shared was that freedom or lack thereof is a matter of personal responsibility. For instance, Janoušková suggested it is up to every individual to defend *her* freedom: “It depends on the woman, how much freedom she can preserve.”<sup>13</sup> Only a minority of artists perceived any influence of established gender roles on their work, but even then this impact was not perceived as an automatic disadvantage. Adriana Šimotová maintained, “I feel a certain social determination, but the perception of freedom or the lack of it can have many forms.”<sup>14</sup> And Olga Karlíková even saw traditional women’s duties or the proverbial second shift as potentially enriching: “If she has a family, children she wants to take care of, she has to divide her time. To some extent she is limited by this while at the same time this opens up another realm of understanding.”<sup>15</sup>

As for the concept of gender itself, the phrasing of the questions and answers alike demonstrated an absence of distinction between the concepts of sex and gender in the Czech context. The theoretical divide between sex and gender, typical of Western discourse, did not enter Czech theoretical discourse until the 2000s. The survey questions were formulated from an essentialist perspective and presented

8 — Věra Jirousová, “Žadné ženské umění neexistuje” (“Women’s Art Does Not Exist”), *Výtvarné umění* 1 (1993): 45, 46. All translations from Jirousová, as well as from other sources written originally in Czech or Slovak and cited in this [text] in English, are mine.

9 — Ibid., 50.

10 — Ibid., 47.

11 — Ibid., 42.

12 — Ibid., 45.

13 — Ibid., 50.

14 — Ibid., 52.

15 — Ibid., 51.

the categories of “man” and “woman” as homogeneous, stable, and natural.<sup>16</sup>

### Curatorial Strategies

In 1992, the all-women exhibition entitled *Kolumbovo vejce* (Columbus's Egg), curated by Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro for the Behémot Gallery, became the first post-1989 exhibition in the Czech context whose concept and selection criteria were based on gender. It became the first out of several women-only projects characteristic of the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> The egg metaphor suggested an unspecified problem and its innovative solution while simultaneously evoking the traditional symbol of the female principle. In a published curatorial text, Čiháková-Noshiro declared her pro-feminist stance: “We have not experienced feminism at its best so far. We want to experience it and bring joy by means of this experience.”<sup>18</sup> This surprisingly positive perception of feminism was, however, compromised in the text of the catalogue. Speaking of the feminist movement, the curator maintained that “emancipation did not bring about any new imaginative approach. It engendered women, who were fat, worn out, and prematurely senescent.” In the catalogue the curator quoted the 1991 text of the Czech sociologist Jiřina Šmejkalová entitled “What Is Feminism? What to Do with Her/Him?” and concluded that “the WOMAN becomes a problem that has to be researched.” According to Čiháková-Noshiro's understanding of feminist theory, “WOMAN” is defined “firstly as a subject of inquiry, the plane on which meanings reveal themselves (for instance in the history of art), and secondly as a subject of female perception, the plane where meanings are created (for example the specific female way of art expression).”<sup>19</sup> To Čiháková-Noshiro, desirable feminism was one without a struggle for emancipation. She perceived feminism in general as an ideology in line with the officially sanctioned employment of women during the forty years of socialist rule, which had

realized full employment for women, introduced them into traditionally masculine professions, and granted them partial financial independence while also imposing the burden of the double shift. What the curator on the other hand envisioned was a joyful feminism or feminism without the “tragedy of the second sex.”

This fairly favorable approach toward feminism was the exception rather than the rule. Far more typical was a refusal of feminism and gender perspectives in art, with both perceived as Western imports. As the art critic Lenka Lindaurová commented, “No debates have evolved regarding female or feminist art here. This term is treated with unease, as it is perceived as a capitalist relic. Even if we indulge ourselves in some relics with pleasure, feminism simply does not belong among the good manners of an intelligent Central European woman.”<sup>20</sup> As if in an attempt to stay away from the unpopular misalliance with feminism, the other all-women exhibitions of the 1990s were characterized by a lack of theoretical framing or proclaimed a stance uninformed by feminism (*Women Homes I and II*). The Czech-German exhibition *Muzzle*, initiated by German curator Juliette Güthlein, was labeled as a foreign import out of sync with local sensibilities. As Pachmanová has argued, “In order to hear the Czech women artists' voices, and to show them in a gendered—as opposed to a gender-neutral—context, the initiative had to be taken not from within but from outside, and the discourse had to be signified as a foreign one.”<sup>21</sup>

A good example of this determination to appear untouched by (presumably) imported feminist theories—a determination that more often than not resulted in an essentialist approach—was the 1998 show *Tělo jako důkaz* (*Body of Evidence*), curated by Štěpánka Müllerová.<sup>22</sup> Müllerová here brought together and exhibited art dealing with the topic of embodiment. In her curatorial text, she presented the women artists' preoccupation with the body as presumably biologically given while maintaining that women's bodies and minds are more tightly interconnected than men's because of women's hormonal cycles: “A woman has a more varied register of bodily experience tied to her psyche through her hormonal

16 — Jirousová's own notions of femininity and masculinity—as apparent in her other texts that deal with the issue of gender—could best be described as a relationship of two complementary principles within each individual, or as the anima and animus in the Jungian sense.

17 — Other women-only exhibitions organized in the early 1990s included *Ženské domovy I* (*Women Homes I*; 1992) and *Ženské domovy II* (*Women Homes II*; 1993); *Ženské umění* (*Women Art*; 1993); and the Czech-German exhibition *Náhubeč* (*Muzzle*; 1994).

18 — Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro, “Ke koncepci výstavy Kolumbovo vejce” (“Towards a Concept of Columbus's Egg Exhibition”), *Atelier* 10 (1992): 7.

19 — Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro, *Kolumbovo vejce* (*Columbus's Egg*), exhibition catalogue, 1992.

20 — Mirek Vodrážka, “Ženské umění ve výtvarné řeči nových medií” (“Women's Art in the Visual Language of New Media”), *Aspekt* 2 (1998): 65. Translation is the author's.

21 — Martina Pachmanová, “The Muzzle: Gender and Sexual Politics in Contemporary Czech Art.”

22 — The exhibition was organized by the Museum of Art Olomouc in 1998. All translations from Müllerová are mine.

system.”<sup>23</sup> By so elevating the role of the female hormonal and physiological “nature,” the curator reproduced the gender stereotype that sees women as being closer to the somatic, material, and vegetative existence as opposed to men and their links to the spiritual realm. Müllerová emphasized gender-based qualities of art produced by women, yet she also characterized them deterministically as symptoms of hormonal and (alleged) neurobiological differences supposedly without any social and cultural determination.

Müllerová’s take on feminism was similarly essentialist. According to her, “The fundamental goal [of feminism] is to liberate woman into ‘womanhood,’ into finding her place within the current system.”<sup>24</sup> This notion of “womanhood” seems problematic and could be easily challenged from feminist social-constructivist perspectives, maintaining that every fixed definition of “womanhood” precludes liberation that could be only reached by means of transgressing essential categories.

The first project in the Czech and Slovak context to critically reflect on gender-centered curatorial strategy was the 2003 exhibition *5 žen, 5 otázek* (*5 Women, 5 Questions*), curated by Pavlína Morganová for the Jelení Gallery. The exhibition comprised interviews conducted by the curator and four young women artists—Lenka Klodová, Petra Čiklová, Silvie Vondřejcová, and Patricie Fexová—with five male artists and one art historian. The starting point for this audio-exhibition about women’s art was the question posed by the curator: “Does it make sense to produce an all-women exhibition, and what should it look like? Should it emphasize its femininity or downplay it? When five men make an exhibition nobody would declare it to be a male exhibition. When women are concerned, one of the first remarks will surely be that it is a female exhibition. How can women in this situation produce a normal exhibition?”

Already the first question in the interview demonstrated the self-reflexive and critical approach toward selection based on (female) gender. The women asked their male colleagues whether they would take part in a women-only exhibition had they been women. Perhaps not surprisingly, some men found it problematic. Michal Pěchouček, for example, thought of it as “slightly offensive. And . . . somehow passé.” Jiří Surůvka was more open to the idea. He was also

the one to comment on the gender bias in favor of all-men exhibitions: “As a man, I take part in men’s exhibitions, and I don’t think about it. If I were a woman I would participate in a women’s exhibition, but maybe I would ask why there are only women.” Even the exhibiting women themselves were not certain whether it was a good idea to participate in an all-women show. In the exhibition catalogue, Klodová stated, “The answer depends on many circumstances—who would invite me to participate, who would exhibit there, where would the exhibition be, and what would be the aim of the exhibition, whether to claim something or to question.” Vondřejcová was even more hesitant: “I am a woman and to be honest I would hesitate. Until Pavlína [Morganová] suggested it, I would not consider myself as a woman artist.”

Another exhibition to question gender as a curatorial and artistic strategy was *A Room of Their Own* by Slovak artists Anetta Mona Chiša and Lucia Tkáčová.<sup>25</sup> The exhibition took place in Medium Gallery in Bratislava, Slovakia, also in the year 2003. Starting with the title, the project worked with citations and appropriations whose primary goal was a critical reception of “clichés appearing in art produced by women in recent time.” The authors were critical of the “emptiness of the language of women’s art, its means of communication and the tired expression of women artists and their persistently repeating interpretations.”<sup>26</sup> The exhibition itself comprised works appropriating topics and approaches stereotypically linked with women’s or feminist art. On display were installations made of women’s magazines, toys, used tampons, cosmetics, and cut hair. Another part was conceived as a “feminist bunker” with textural works resembling the “Truisms” by Jenny Holzer and a series featuring a Barbie doll raped by Superman, Batman, Ironman, and Spiderman action figures. Included were works that critiqued pornography using porn magazines, figurines combining attributes of both genders, and a set of stereotypically masculine objects encased by crocheting. A room dedicated to the theme of domesticity and fashion contained, among other items, a display of women’s underwear, tea towels with embroidered French phrases on the theme of love, paintings of kitchen still-lives, casts of the interiors of handbags, videos showing details of depilation of various bodily parts, and so on.

23 — Štěpánka Müllerová, *Tělo jako důkaz* (*Body of Evidence*), Olomouc: Museum of Art Olomouc, 1998, 9.

24 — Ibid., 10.

25 — The original title of the exhibition was *A Room on Their Own*.

26 — Lucia Čarná, “Feminizmus nie je to, za čo ho považujete” (“Feminism Is Not What You Think”), *Profile*, January 2003, 89.

The artists intended their exhibition to be deliberately sarcastic and filled with clichés, an ironic criticism of the stereotypical art and theoretical framework that conventionally interprets certain approaches and themes as presumably quintessentially feminine. However, as illustrated by a (positive) review published in *Profile* magazine, in spite of the artists' statement, the majority of visitors did not get the intended point. When recalling the exhibition later, Tkáčová commented on this misinterpretation: "Looking back now, I have the feeling we did it too early. Both of us had seen a lot of art of this type, and to us they were all tired empty forms. But people in the Slovak scene didn't see them that way yet."<sup>27</sup> With this project the authors realized a post-feminist critique of a supposedly worn-out language of women's visual art in a context where the majority of local artists and gallery-goers did not even start to perceive gender as a relevant category.

In spite of their different concepts and aims, all of these exhibitions shared a preoccupation with female gender. Throughout the 1990s, the gender discourse tended to refer to women's art alone. Yet already in 1993, there was a gender-themed exhibition of male artists entitled *Jako ženy* (*Just Like Women*), curated by Petr Písařík for the Nová síň Gallery in Prague. The exhibition presented works of thirteen male artists working from the position of their "inner women." The catalogue contained texts by psychologists (male and female) interpreting the artists' relationships to their feminine inner personalities, or "anima" in Carl Jung's terminology. The featured artists were trying to picture their versions of female art, feminine topics, and sensitivity, yet the outcome was mostly a portrayal of gender stereotypes and fragments of female physiognomy. At the same time, the concept of playing with one's imaginary gender allowed for a notion of a more flexible, constructed, and/or androgynous gender identity. The plan to interpret artwork by men as if it had been created by women also enabled the audience (at least in theory) to untie the causal links between the gendered aspects of the representation and the gender of the artist, and instead to perceive gender as a construction in the eyes of the beholder.

A similar experiment, this time with an openly feminist twist, was the exhibition *On*

*je rád Feministka* (*He Likes to Be a Feminist; also translated into English as Happy Macho Feminist*), which took place in Buryzone Gallery in Bratislava, Slovakia, in 2002. The curators, Petra Hanáková and Alexandra Kusá, presented their all-male selection as an exhibition by women feminist artists.<sup>28</sup> They chose works that could be viewed as "sympathetic to gender or feminist issues, or that reflected new themes until today usually not spotted in the oeuvre of Slovak artists... including works tackling clichés tied with gender and sexuality."<sup>29</sup> The curators recontextualized some older works in order to reveal their latent gender-related content. They also focused on themes traditionally described as feminine or issues that had been explored by the feminist movement but presented them as freely available to men, thus stressing their strategic use rather than their "natural" relatedness to any particular gender. Whereas the curators of the *Just Like Women* exhibition urged their male artists to work as if they were women in order to explore "men's notion of femininity," in their 2002 exhibition Hanáková and Kusá used the featured works to the end of deconstructing that very notion.

The last step taken in the process of considering gender discourse in Czech (and Slovak) curatorial practice was the inclusion of other-than-heterosexual artists and of themes of transgender identity. Only in the most recent curatorial strategies are we witnessing a more complex schema that entertains and invites a fluid notion of gender. This shift, for instance, was reflected in an exhibition concerned with "lesbian art" entitled *Coming Soon*, organized in 2011 under the umbrella of the Queer Eye festival in Prague. In *Coming Soon*, the Slovak curator/artist Tamara Moyzes decided to present a non-essentialist, consciously political, open-ended exhibition whose main aim was not to constitute a category of lesbian art or to define a fixed lesbian identity but to pose questions regarding the roles of sexuality and gender in art production. In her unpublished text for the exhibition, she asked whether "lesbian art can be produced by a heterosexual woman, a man, a homosexual or transgender person, etc." Rhetorically, Moyzes left these questions unanswered; however, by including women who identify themselves as alternately lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer, she opted for an identity-based definition of

27 — Zuzana Štefková, *Svědectví: Ženským hlasem. Rozhovory s českými a slovenskými umělkyněmi a teoretickými umění*. (Testimonies: In a Female Voice. Interviews with Czech and Slovak Women Artists and Art Theoreticians), Prague: Vysoká škola umělecko-průmyslová, 2012, 336.

28 — In Slovak, the word "feminist" is grammatically gendered, so the original title suggested that the artists in the show are happy to be not only feminists but also women.

29 — Unpublished curatorial text.



“lesbian art.” The exhibition consisted of seven women and one transgender artist—Michal/Michelle Šíml—who at the time went under his masculine identity.<sup>30</sup> The inclusion of a transgender artist suggested that while acknowledging self-identification with lesbian desire is a condition *sine qua non* for lesbian art, the curator simultaneously thwarted the traditional dualist opposition of homo- vs. heterosexuality where lesbians are identified as women.<sup>31</sup>

[. . .]

### Conclusion

Due to the isolation of the countries of the Eastern bloc during the Cold War, gender in art in the Czech and Slovak context was not critically discussed until after 1989. With the opening of borders, Western gender theory and comparable visual material became available, yet what followed should not be seen as a passive acceptance of Western (feminist) terminology and strategies by the local art scene. Contrary to the still-popular belief that feminist and gender perspectives were incongruently implanted into Czech art (their proponents often being accused of following a “fad” or “Western import”), the evolution of a local gendered discourse correlated with changes in Czech society as a whole.

The transition from state socialism to capitalism brought along a return to more traditional practices of gender expectations, a growing gap between men’s and women’s salaries, as well as financial insecurity on the part of (among others) socially vulnerable women (single mothers, unemployed senior women, pensioners). Another problematic phenomenon connected with the opening of borders was the proliferation of sex tourism and prostitution in Prague and in the border regions along the former Iron Curtain. These issues then precipitated a response, if not downright critique. In the field of visual art, the main object of contention and criticism was the exploitation of (especially women’s) bodies in advertising, pornography, fashion, and the beauty industry. On a different note, an important development in the local grounding of the theoretical gender framework of art production involved the establishing of Gender Studies as an academic curriculum taught at the university level in 1998. Six years later, Gender Studies became officially accredited at Charles

University. Last but not least, the implementation of gender (art) discourse was aided by the coming of age of the generation that grew up after the dissolution of the socialist regime.

At the same time, the story of framing Eastern European gendered art cannot be portrayed as a simple echo of the development of gender discourse in the West. In spite of many similarities and overlaps with feminist issues in art of the 1970s (namely the attempts of art critics and curators to identify form and content characteristic of art made by women and to establish terms to describe it—only to critique the essentialism, one-sidedness, and heterosexism of this approach a decade or so later), there was a key difference to the process. Unlike in the United States and Western Europe, Eastern European art dealing with gender was not created in the context of a popular feminist movement, and most of the leading Czech women artists would reject not only an association with feminism but even their art being interpreted as gender specific.

[. . .]

As this present study demonstrates, the story of Czech and Slovak art dealing with gender cannot be complete without an analysis of the discursive tools and institutions that help to produce “gendered art.” Through the analysis of several relevant surveys and curatorial texts, this chapter examines the conception and development of gender-specific terminology and gendered iconography in post-1989 Czech and Slovak art and art criticism. The study delineates how the changing social conditions gradually transformed the notion of gender both in the larger society and in art. It outlines how, after the initial stage of conflating gender with biological sex and/or mistaking it for femininity, art exhibitions started embracing the notion of male gender and transgender as well. Finally, the chapter seeks to manifest how Czech and Slovak art institutions (galleries and schools) produce gender difference, and gender bias, while at the same time denying their own role in this process. To sum up, the story this chapter tells might be missing a narrative arc, but it seeks not to miss the greater picture. By tying art to the institutions that frame and contextualize it, the story highlights key challenges pertinent not only to gendered discourse in the Czech and Slovak art contexts but to Czech and Slovak societies in general.

30 — The poster suggested that only women artists took part in the exhibition, yet Michal Šíml is a masculine name and surname.

31 — When I asked Michelle/Michal Šíml about her/his self-identification, s/he concluded, “I am a spiritual lesbian.”

Personal communication, October 13, 2010.

# The Theory of *Pleshka*

YEVGENIY FIKS

A *pleshka*—a term of Soviet gay argot designating homosexual cruising spots in the public space of Moscow and other cities in the Soviet Union. Today, the Moscow *pleshkas* from Soviet times (with few exceptions) no longer function. In the last ten years, the internet has largely virtualized the geography of Moscow's same-sex desire, and the physical *pleshkas* have relocated to cyberspace. *Pleshkas* of the past could now be conceptualized as spaces of memory and mourning over the fate of homosexuals of the Soviet epoch—as places of absence of Soviet gay history, subjectivity, and self-identification. Oh, if only Grindr could pinpoint the location of the lost souls of gays and lesbians of the past! The memory of homosexuals of Soviet times is not registered in the space of the history and geography of Moscow. Their (under-)subjectivity has forever dissolved into the city itself. However, as the current representatives of the LGBT community, we must reclaim the spaces of collective memory of our city, Moscow, as one big *pleshka* that also belongs to us. This demand is necessary for the formation of our own subjectivity, self-awareness, and the sensation of history here and now.

## *Pleshka* Departing

In January 2013, the Russian State Duma adopted a law “on the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.” In March 2013, Vladik Mamyshev, an artist who largely personified perestroika and post-Soviet queer aesthetic, perished. In June 2013, President Putin signs the law “on the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.” In July 2013, Georgiy Guryanov, another famous Russian artist of the homosexual aestheticism, died. An epoch of the first two decades of the post-Soviet project comes to an end.

But beginning in the '90s and until very recently, Vladik Mamyshev and Georgiy Guryanov's candid homo-aesthetics, in combination with their vivacious personalities, seemed like a spectacle, quite acceptable to the post-Soviet bourgeoisie ready to “forgive them everything because of their talent.” The post-Soviet queer artist of the '90s and '00s is an *enfant terrible*, a jester in the court of post-Soviet capitalism who “decorated” the regime, legitimizing it. Only by accepting the new

consumerist order and dissolving in it, did the post-Soviet queer artist receive the right to exist. They<sup>1</sup> became a compromiser, hoping that the free market and the neoliberal “right to individualism” would “normalize” them. However, the events of 2013 showed that the post-Soviet version of capitalism is not capable of defending the “individualism” of a post-Soviet queer subject.

In the '90s and '00s, a post-Soviet queer artist was expected to reproduce signs of Western queer-aesthetics. Russian queer artists had to conform to the notions of the Russian elite who took Mapplethorpe, Pierre et Gilles, etc., as their examples. The post-Soviet queer artist was assigned to the same line of work as their Western colleagues. Overnight, the *pleshka* had to learn to speak the “global gay argot” and turn into a Western *cruising site*. The post-Soviet queer artist legitimized themselves only by conforming to the Russian art scene's notions of Western gay culture. However, this was implicitly homophobic: the artistic community awaited easily readable signs of Western gay culture (for example, overt sexuality, provocation, decorativism, kitsch) from the post-Soviet queer artist, so that at the moment of “recognition” it could shrug off such an artist for their superficiality and secondariness.

Contemporary art as a part of the life of Russian society reflects many of its problems, including homophobia. With rare exceptions in the '90s and '00s, the Russian art community looked down upon their own queer artists. The right wing referred to the post-Soviet queer artist as a kind of court jester. However, the left wing, until recently, saw an “irresponsible decorator” and a lackey of the new neoliberal order. This snobbery, both from the right and the left, pushed the queer artist towards formal aesthetics, which should have given them autonomy within the space of neoliberal individualism. However, in the last few years, the situation has changed, and there now appear seedlings of collaboration between the left intellectual-artistic wing and queer artists and

1 — Original translator's note: The third-person plural pronoun is used throughout the article to remain consistent with views on gender espoused by the LGBTQ community. This convention is not common in Russian and is not present in the original text, which defaults to male pronouns.

activists. Russian queer artists have begun to distance themselves from the right wing. The reemergence of state homophobia in Russia in 2013 had shown that the hopes placed on post-Soviet capitalism as an emancipating trajectory for the LGBT were futile in 2013, and the “new” neoliberal Russia had, without a second thought, betrayed its “decorators.”

### **Museums, Galleries, *Pleshkas* (Queer Nationalization)**

What about the absence of a Soviet queer aesthetic? Where are the *pleshkas* of Soviet art? After homosexuality was criminalized in the USSR in 1934, it dissolved into theatre, film, art, etc. Queer energy could not have simply disappeared—it was sublimated. We are talking about works where it is impossible to notice homosexuality at the level of visual representation. In talking about the “presence” or “absence” of gay aesthetics in Soviet visual culture, it is primarily necessary for us to state its sublimation and dissolution. Hidden homosexuality is present in the artworks of every period of Soviet art: from the historical avant-garde to Moscow conceptualism. It is in every hall of the Russian Museum and Tretyakov Gallery. Homo-aesthetics never left Soviet art, just as there has not been a day in the history of the Soviet Union since 1934 that someone’s “non-traditional” life was not lived. Homosexuality only relocated into the field of the invisible.

The concept of dissolution and sublimation of gay aesthetics in Soviet culture means that we must recognize its presence in invisible/unknowable forms. Since we will never find out in which specific works of Soviet art queer subjectivity did or did not dissolve, the post-Soviet LGBT subject must reclaim all art of the Soviet period as belonging to them. This means that a present-day post-Soviet LGBT cultural producer does not find themselves in a situation of “rootless cosmopolitanism” at all but, conversely, becomes an inheritor of a queer imagination sublimated in Soviet visual culture. This means that we can conceptually condense this dissolved queer subjectivity and return it to ourselves. This does not at all mean a retrospective “outing” of some Soviet artists as homosexuals. It is about a mental de-sublimation of the gay culture, dissolved in Soviet art, as a strategy of formation of today’s LGBT consciousness. The post-Soviet queer subject must declare their rights to Soviet history and return to their historical *pleshkas*.

I propose to conceptualize the museums of Soviet art as gay spaces—as *pleshkas* of Soviet

art. In the absence of historiography of overt Soviet queer-aesthetics, we must nationalize all Soviet art as also belonging to LGBT people. Instead of establishing one museum of LGBT art as a ghetto, I urge to conceptualize all art museums as museums of LGBT people, since their dissolution is a historically constituted form of Soviet queer-(non)representation. We must recognize this invisibility and undergo the process of sublimation in reverse.

### **The Theory of *Pleshka***

Judith Butler never frequented Soviet *pleshkas*. Queer theory arrived into post-Soviet space as part of the process of globalization, and unfortunately, along with intellectual liberation on the territory of post-Soviet space, simultaneously became an instrument of neoliberal expansion and repression. I would like to summon the Soviet *pleshka*, which determined how same-sex desire functioned in the Soviet experience “before queer theory.” I would like to turn to *pleshka* as the “bare life” of local history, which forces us to resist the dictates of the seemingly progressive cultural imperialism of the ’90s and the ’00s. We, the present-day representatives of the post-Soviet LGBT people, must accept and recognize Soviet gays and lesbians as historical subjects, existing before the globalized construct of “LGBT” and queer theory. I plead for theory that would absorb the specifics of the “bare life” of the sexual and gender margins of the Soviet experience into itself.

The theory of *pleshka* must not get bogged down with the commonplaces of global gay discourse. It must not drive itself into patterns, which hide under assertions about the universality of corresponding experiences. Until we meet Judith Butler in the “Sadko” café or at the “Prospect Marksa” Metro station, queer theory will not become post-Soviet theory. Globalization exerts pressure on those who are located in the post-Soviet sexual/gender margins, forcing us to accept globalized (and in reality, specifically Western) forms of identity. It is worth seeking out local and, consequently, more organic forms of identification in the living narrative of Soviet gays and lesbians. Only by accepting this narrative, and not the volumes of Anglo-American theory, can we be sure that liberation activism in post-Soviet space will have a future.

The theory of *pleshka* is queer theory with the subtraction of cultural imperialism. The theory of *pleshka* must not only become a post-Soviet response to globalized queer theory—which is

contaminated by the connection with neoliberalism—but a theory of a wider discourse of otherwise-thinking,<sup>2</sup> including, but not limited to, sexual dissent. The theory of *pleshka* must combine the history of Soviet gays and lesbians with Soviet history overall, integrating their narrative into the grand narrative of Soviet history. *Pleshka* is a space of simultaneous presence and absence, hidden and visible, impossible and possible. The liberation of *pleshka* must happen through the exertion of *pleshka* itself, with the memory of the *pleshka* past.

The formulas of global gay discourse marginalize and estrange entire generations of Soviet homosexuals—still our contemporaries—those real subjects of Soviet sexual and gender dissent, and not ones concocted by critical theory. These people know about what it meant to be “queer” in the Soviet Union better than international LGBT apparatchiks. They do not need bureaucratic templates to describe their oppression, much as they do not need English slang to describe their sexual practices.

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2 — Original translator's note: *inakomisliye*, a term analogous to “dissent,” which is used henceforward.

We had our own language and our own feelings before the '90s brought us globalization. Our historical memory and sexuality does not need to be “normalized” through the practices of neoliberalism. This lost generation of Soviet gays and lesbians, people of an older or middle generation, is not of interest to scholars who continue to move forward, invent new theories, and leave behind those who really lived and continue to live their “non-traditional” lives.

I urge all of us to take to the *pleshkas* of Soviet cities, to collectively articulate a new theory of *pleshka* as a discourse of historical memory, locality, liberation, and democracy. The theory of *pleshka* is a theory of the tangible, the political, and the everyday. The word *pleshka* simultaneously demonstrates our marginality, oppression, invisibility, and at the same time, the feeling of our self-esteem and self-irony. *Pleshka* could and must provide a reference point for a genuinely liberating theory in the present.

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## In? Out? In Between?: Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory

MARTINA PACHMANOVÁ

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[...]

II.

In 1993, the Czech art journal *Výtvarné umění* (*Visual Art*) published a series of interviews with Czech women artists from all generations. Most of them strictly denied any relevance of their work to gender, femininity, or feminism. The message coming from this questionnaire that opened the issue of gender and art on a larger platform for the first time was clear: There is no women's art; there is just good and bad art, and sex and gender have nothing to do with creativity. Although the work of many of the interviewed artists contained critical aspects related

to body politics and women's and men's roles in society, they perceived their work as part of a universal/ist and, thus, genderless activity.<sup>1</sup>

Thirteen years later, a young Slovak artist, Nora Růžicková, started to work on an installation titled *signifying/signified* (2005), in which she used interviews with contemporary Slovak women curators and art historians. Most of Růžicková's questions were focused on the social and economic status of their profession, on their relationship to feminism and

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1 — For more, see Martina Pachmanová, “The Muzzle: Gender and Sexual Politics in Contemporary Czech Art,” *ARTMargins* (November 15, 2001).

gender, and, last but not least, on gender stereotypes accompanying their work. Although only a handful of the respondents explicitly recognized the relevance of gender to the examination of art and art history, almost all of them pointed out a paradox that this highly feminized profession is “a male world” (Sandra Kusá). At the same time, many women curators and art historians entered slippery ground in repeating gender clichés that disqualified the critical potential of their work. They were caught in the trap of essentialism while sticking to the notion that since women are “more emotional and delicate” they might be “in some respects more sensitive just for the sphere of visual art, for perception of artifacts” (Zora Rusinová) or, as another respondent replied, since art and art history are connected with the notion of “aesthetics” and “beauty,” “women incline [more often than men] to choose them as their profession” (Alena Vrbánová).<sup>2</sup>

Although these two examples can hardly be taken as an “objective” image of feminist consciousness among Eastern European artists, curators, and art historians, they manifest some elements that have been influencing the local discussions about art and art history and theory for the last two decades. They document women’s ambivalence about critical feminist and gender agendas against a background of fear of marginalization and ghettoization on the one side, as well as the idealistic neglect of power mechanisms that are hidden behind the beautiful, spiritual, and metaphysical facade of “art.” As Edit András put it in 1995, one of the fundamental postulates in this part of Europe states “that good art is one and indivisible, and that it only has quality, but no sex.”<sup>3</sup>

While a feminist and gender agenda has been an integral part of Western European and North American art and art criticism and history since the end of the 1960s, by and large, the Eastern European art scene has remained distrustful of—and sometimes even hostile to—these critical practices and theories. This applies not only to the pre-1989 period, when Eastern Europe (except for Yugoslavia) was isolated from most important intellectual and art

debates (not only about feminism and gender, but also about postmodernism, poststructuralism, etc.) happening in the West. During this period, the biggest “enemy” was the totalitarian regime which women and men in the counterculture fought against, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to communicate across the Iron Curtain.<sup>4</sup> The non-acceptance of feminist thought survived even the fall of the Berlin Wall; it continued to be considered an “alien” element to Eastern European society, where, many argued, women were more emancipated than their Western counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of information and of a real dialogue with the West; the deficit of women’s solidarity and collective action; the surviving monopoly of the modernist tradition and the dominant concept of art as a transcendent category distant from life and from social and psychological processes; skepticism about all “-isms,” which were perceived with suspicion and often marked as dangerously close to new “totality”; a total mistrust in political art, which was stigmatized by the official propaganda of the communist regime; and, last but not least, sexism and misogyny occupying every corner of society—these are just a few of the most important reasons why feminist and gender debates were for so long marginalized among Eastern European artists, curators, and art historians.

In spite of this unwelcoming situation, there were remarkable women artists working behind the Iron Curtain whose work was strikingly similar to women’s and feminist art existing in the West. As there were only a few of these who, as early as in the late 1960s, used traditionally feminine symbols, materials, and acts to subvert the dominance of the masculine

4 — As András contends: “Along with its intricate philosophical, psychological and art theoretical background, the entire debate [about feminism and women’s art] originating in the early seventies and by now producing a literature which could fill an entire library has remained just as almost completely unknown [...] As a consequence, we are entirely ignorant of the whole discourse and its history, including subtle but essential changes in attitudes that took place in the meantime. The same way we have remained oblivious to the arguments and counter-arguments of the debate, as well as to the language of its own [...] In addition to the drawn-out existence of the Iron Curtain interrupting the free exchange of information, there is another reason why [we] were shut off from this discourse [...] Subcultural identity was forced to be subordinated to the fight against political repression and the existing regime. Multiculturalism fell victim to the unofficial, underground art movements’ fight against the official art.” Ibid., 26–27. Although this statement primarily reflects the situation in Hungary, it is valid for most countries in the former Eastern bloc.

5 — This myth is fed not only by popular socialist realist imagery of women working in male professions (as tractor drivers, foundry workers, etc.) that spread especially during the 1950s. Mainly it comes from the successful propaganda of the official communist policy that asserted that men and women had already achieved equality. Nothing, however, was further from reality.

2 — Some of the interviews accompanied by Nora Růžicková’s critical analysis were published in the book *Artemis a Dr. Faust: Ženy v českých a slovenských dějinách umění* (*Artemis and Dr. Faust: Women in Czech and Slovak Art History*), eds. Milena Bartlová and Martina Pachmanová (Prague: Academia, 2008), 217 and 213.

3 — Edit András, “Contemporary (Women’s) Art and (Women) Artists on Water Ordeal,” in *Water Ordeal/Vízpróba*, ed. Edit András and András Gábor (Budapest: Óbudai Társaskör, 1995), 41.



Natalia LL (Natalia Lach-Lachowicz). *Post-Consumer Art*. 1975. Chromogenic color print, 20 × 24" (50.5 × 60.5 cm).  
 Courtesy MOCAK Collection and the artist

canon in art of privileged male subjectivity (Alina Szapocznikow in Poland, Jana Želibská in the former Czechoslovakia, Sanja Iveković in Croatia, and the flourishing textile art practiced by women artists across the region), and their feminism was latent rather than explicitly manifested, there was basically no theoretical discourse on the social role of the sexes or gender politics in/of visual arts in Eastern Europe. Moreover, in the post-1968 era, there was no effort here to interlink these individual activities and organize a women's art movement.<sup>6</sup>

[. . .]

The situation significantly changed in the 1990s, when a new generation of women artists, curators, and art critics entered the scene. Unlike their predecessors, they started to tackle the issues associated with gender, be it on the level of body and sexuality or the more general social and cultural roles of women and men. Moreover, when the Berlin Wall fell, the number of practicing and exhibiting women artists significantly multiplied. While their women colleagues of older generations camouflaged issues of gender and sexuality in symbolic hints and metaphors, women artists who grew up in late socialism but had already been confronted with the international art scene by the time of their studies were much more explicit, sometimes even to the edge of brutality. Whether they touched upon these issues intuitively or under the impact of absorbed information and experiences with women's art in the West, what they still lacked was self-reflection that would generate a relevant gender discourse.<sup>7</sup>

6 — A number of all-women exhibitions took place across the region, but, as the organizers of these activities remarked later on, they usually faced criticism from male artists and curators as "separationist" and mainly foolish acts that raised sex above real quality and autonomous art. The exception was the field of decorative or textile art, disciplines that were traditionally assigned to women and occupied the position of a low-status art.

It should be noted, though, that only rarely did these women's group exhibitions have an ambition to launch a critical gender agenda. One of the exceptions was, for example, an exhibition titled *Výberové pribuznosti* (*Selective Differences*) curated by Jana Geržová and Kata Hubová at the Gallery of the Slovak Foundation of Fine Arts in Bratislava in 1989. As the two curators stated in the exhibition catalogue, they considered the show to be an opportunity to answer questions of the psychosocial sphere of art creativity with regard to gender and women's identity in art.

7 — However, there are more conciliatory voices that point out that such gender indifference enabled women artists to either keep an ironic distance or be consonant with a totally non-ideological essence of "post-history" or postmodernism. As Péter György noted, "The gender issues appear in their work not as a military abstraction but as a personal experience." See Péter György, "Feminizmus, gender-otázka: Bytzenou a umělkynou v dnešnom Madarsku" ("Feminism, Gender Issues: To Be a Woman and a Woman Artist in Today's Hungary"), in *Gender Studies in Arts and Culture/Rodové štúdiá v umení a kultúre* (Bratislava: Soros Center of Contemporary Art, 2000), 51. However, this approach does not take into account that even the most personal experiences and acts are inextricable from mechanisms of power and, thus, also from ideology.

Since there was an absence of discussion and analysis of gender relations in most Eastern European countries, as the philosophical or theoretical language of Western gender debate was only slowly discovered and there was only vaporous knowledge about the history of women's emancipation in Eastern European countries,<sup>8</sup> critical gender debate had no substantial foundation on which to develop. The youngest generation of women artists might have been—and were—loud, shameless, and in many respects courageous to break many taboos about the female body and sexuality, but they were afraid of identifying themselves with a "marginal" group of women. As András put it quite accurately: "This fear is not unjustified, given the popular old backlash argument that their success is the result of the passing fad of women's art rather than the quality of their work."<sup>9</sup>

This conspicuous ambivalence toward gender and feminism matched the views of most art critics, curators, and art historians regardless of gender, age, or political affiliation in the regions. While some explained that we do not need any form of feminism,<sup>10</sup> others avoided a complex discussion about the meanings of the "F" word in the context of their local cultures and histories and adopted the popular concept of postfeminism, which was accepted as a "soft" and apolitical phase following the end of the dreaded hard-core or even militant feminism which, ironically, did not precede in this part of Europe. If Western debates about postfeminism reacted to its preceding stage of radicalism and essentialism, and brought about new theoretical paradigms, in Eastern Europe, postfeminism mostly remained an empty signifier; it was a rhetorical figure that might have somewhat softened the devaluation of women's

8 — During the nineteenth century, women's emancipation often went hand in hand with the fight for national independence in many parts of Eastern and Central Europe. The first wave of "Eastern European" feminists was one of the strongest and, with regard to electoral rights, among the most successful in early-twentieth-century Europe. However, this part of history was either marginalized or totally erased from the history books after World War II.

9 — Edit András, "Gender Minefield: The Heritage of the Past," *n.paradoxa*, issue 11 (1999); reprint of a paper given at the opening symposium for the exhibition *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, October 15–16, 1999.

10 — For instance, a Czech art critic, Marek Pokorný, in his review of the group women's project *Women's Home* at the alternative site of a Prague Old Town house in 1993, appreciated that while the exhibition included eleven women artists, "Its final effect is not carried by a feminist ideology—it seems that in this respect [our society] is still a more tolerant environment with experiences of a 'different type.'" Marek Pokorný, "O čase s prostorem ve štenecově domě" ("On Time and Space in Stenc House"), *Ateliér* no. 8 (1994): 12.



art by defenders of traditional gender “order.” However, in reality, it further delayed a truly critical gender debate.

[...]

### III.

From everything that has been mentioned so far, my initial critical comment about a prevailing tendency of Western feminists to ignore Eastern Europe appears without foundation. One might argue that gender-focused and feminist Eastern European art and theory can hardly be marginalized when it does not exist. And yet, the situation is not so simple. While the first decade after 1989 was permeated with distrust toward gender and feminist issues in art, during the past ten years, Eastern European artists and theorists have become much more gender- and feminism-conscious. Although many women artists here still do not openly claim to be feminists, their art strategies are more critical, self-reflective, and informed, and—as a few previous quotations demonstrate—so are the theoretical analyses of their work and the gender politics of art in general.<sup>11</sup>

There are still many ideological biases and institutional obstacles that weaken the efforts of feminist artists and scholars to challenge the mainstream masculine canon of art. Let us take only a disturbingly low awareness of gender issues among Eastern European journalists who write about art; the ignorance about women artists in the university curricula of art history courses; antipathy toward theory and predominant formalist and material/ist art-historical analyses; or the scandalous ignorance about women artists among many prominent galleries and museums.<sup>12</sup> And yet, since the late 1990s, there have appeared a noticeable number of exhibitions, articles, publications, and conferences/symposia that have addressed the issues of gender and art in Eastern Europe, and which

have shown not only the potential of “postcommunist” gender-conscious artworks and feminist strategies, but also the self-centeredness of the Western mainstream feminist canon.<sup>13</sup>

The one thing that is still painfully missing from the local debates about gender and art is substantial historical research. Most feminist and gender-oriented analyses and critiques of art omit exploration of older periods, and are mainly focused on postwar and contemporary art practices and theories. Unfortunately, this absence of historical context that would show how the role of women artists changed in the course of local histories and how gender politics informed visual representation and the writing of art history in the past makes the efforts of gender analysts less credible in terms of the still very rigid academic discipline of art history.<sup>14</sup> The lack of historical references also complicates the identification of contemporary women artists with other women, whether predecessors or contemporaries.

So where does contemporary feminist and gender discourse in art in Eastern Europe stand, and what makes it different from the West? How can it be incorporated into the global feminist art agenda?

In the beginning of this essay, I pointed out that Eastern Europe was the West’s “Other” during the Cold War, but since it has been part of a Western civilization that is ethnically and racially the same as the “First World,” it does not qualify for postcolonial discourse.<sup>15</sup> The

13 — Among the most significant platforms that contributed to generating and spreading a relevant gender debate on the international scale were several periodicals, including *n.paradoxa* (international feminist art journal published by Katy Deepwell in London), *Praesens* (Central European contemporary art review published in Budapest), and *ARTMargins* (online journal focused on contemporary Central and Eastern European visual culture, hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara).

14 — Speaking of my personal experience in the Czech Republic, it was only after I published a dissertation that explored gender issues in Czech modernism in the first half of the twentieth century that most of my previous work that dealt with contemporary art and gender theory was taken seriously. See Martina Pachmanová, *Neznámá území českého moderního umění: Pod lupou gender (Unknown Territories of Czech Modern Art: Through the Looking Glass of Gender)* (Prague: Argo, 2004).

15 — For a debate on postcolonialism and Eastern Europe, albeit in this case mostly Russia, see Ekaterina Dyogot [Degot], “How to Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?” *ARTMargins* (November 1, 2001); and Margaret Dikovitskaya, “A Response to Ekaterina Dyogot’s Article: Does Russia Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?” *ARTMargins* (January 30, 2002). As for the position of Eastern Europe in relation to the West, I agree with Edit András, who wrote: “The formerly colonized regions were able to incorporate and further develop the teachings of poststructuralist philosophy and the deconstructionist methods of feminist criticism more quickly and more markedly and, moreover, were able to develop a theory of postcolonialism because they were at the opposite end of the scale relative to the norm. The regions, however, that did have a place in the dominant paradigm, only a secondary one as befitted the ‘other’ within the dominant paradigm, had to first come to terms with the schizophrenia of outside versus inside, i.e., with

11 — However, not only in the “Second” World but also in the West, there are not very many women artists today who would openly identify themselves or their work as feminist, but their oeuvre continues to generate a critical discussion about art, art history, and their clichés.

12 — Just one example out of many: During the sixteen years of its existence, the Prague-based Kunststhal, Rudolfinum Gallery has not run a single solo show of a Czech female artist, while Czech solo shows of male artists are an integral part of the gallery’s program. When asked about this shocking disproportion by a Czech feminist activist, Mirek Vodrážka, in a documentary film titled *Mlha a moc (Fog and Power)* in 2006, the director of the Rudolfinum Gallery, Petr Nedoma, claimed that if there were any contemporary Czech woman artist whose work reached a high enough quality, the gates of the gallery would be open to her. He did not explain the criteria by which “high quality” art should be measured, but one thing was clear: This is a degree of quality that is a privilege of Czech male artists only.

postcolonial dimension of current feminist debate as well as art debate leaves the mostly Caucasian Eastern Europe on the margins. To expand the frame of reference to the former Eastern bloc and to broaden models of “analyzing the role of gender in cultural experience to accommodate the coextensivity of gender and other modes of subjectivity—including aspects of sexual orientation, racial and ethnic identifications, nationality, class, and so on”<sup>16</sup> still seems to be an unreachable goal.<sup>17</sup>

However, there are more significant reasons why Eastern Europe is excluded from mainstream feminist art discourse today. One of them is that unlike feminists from the “Third World,” who often work and live in the “colorful” West, Eastern European feminist artists, theorists, and scholars usually operate from their native countries, and are thus farther from the center than many women of color.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, one should be fair to remark that up until now, Eastern European artists and feminist and gender experts in the field were incapable of creating a collective platform from which they could be more vocal and more visible on the international scene, a mission that Third World feminists accomplished a while ago. So if there exists a dose of ignorance and hegemony over the “ex-East” on the Western side, it is counterbalanced by self-isolation or self-marginalization on the side of Eastern Europe itself.

Thus the Eastern European feminist and gender-critical discourse continues to be a myriad of mostly individual and fragmented voices rather than a “polylogue,” which makes any attempt to define its sharp contours inevitably provisional.<sup>19</sup> And yet, there is something

positive behind this diversity of opinions and approaches. Although Eastern European feminists became well-informed about Western feminist criticism and gender methodologies during the last ten years, they soon realized that with the background of radical political changes in the world after 1989, there can be no cohesive feminist “manual” to provide a stable context in which artists and theorists can situate their work. Instead of assimilating the Western feminist master narratives and using them as “ready-made,” generally applicable concepts, the truly critical and most inspiring feminist thinkers in Eastern Europe have been employing and transforming them as motivational vehicles to raise questions related to gender and sexual difference, while respecting distinct artistic, cultural, and historical contexts of any given country.

The understanding of gender difference in terms of the background of the transition from state socialism toward global capitalism, and exploring both gendered subject and body in the process of formation became—partially under the influence of poststructuralist philosophy<sup>20</sup>—a shared interest and responsibility for women, and occasionally even for male artists and scholars. Rather than searching for a universal female aesthetic or celebrating mythical figures of national heroines, feminists have been using their agenda to disturb collective narratives of all kinds, whether based in art (the modernist canon) and its history (male geniuses) or disguised as collective “good” in social strata (globalization, commodification, nuclear family, heterosexual “order,” Europeanism, etc.). As Slovak art historian and curator Katarína Rusnáková put it while talking about gender and art in Slovakia at the turn of the millennium:

*To deal with questions of gender and sexuality in art [today] requires to understand them as fluid, instable entities that are culturally and socially constructed. I don't want to deny that,*

the problem of belonging.” Edit András “Who’s Afraid of a New Paradigm? The ‘Old’ Art Criticism of the East versus the ‘New’ Critical Theory of the West,” *ARTMargins* (April 20, 2002).

16 — Amelia Jones, “Conceiving the Intersection of Feminism and Visual Culture” (introduction), in Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 9.

17 — Although there are language obstacles that make it hard for Western experts to handle the texts on feminism and art written in minor local languages, one must argue that many other texts on this topic from the “Other” Europe are available in English.

18 — If we look at the representation of “Third World” women artists in most international shows, such as the [...] show *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* [Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007], it is striking that most of them either studied or live (or both) in the West; this is not the case with their Eastern European colleagues. The question is then to what extent these women of color or non-Caucasian origin really represent the authentic postcolonial female/feminist subject.

19 — Some attempts to generalize both the content and context of gender issues in art across Eastern Europe have been made recently. However, their arguments tend to homogenize the variety of local gender and feminist “dialects.” Ewa Grigar writes in her recently published article on gender and art in postcommunist countries that it is a “religious affiliation [that] holds a place in

Central Eastern Europe similar to the place race holds in [the United States of] America,” but one has to wonder how this statement relates to many Eastern European countries where the spiritual and even political power of the Church was brutally suppressed during the communist era, and which are among the most secular countries in the world today (such as the Czech Republic). See Ewa Grigar, “The Gendered Body as Raw Material for Women Artists of Central Eastern Europe after Communism,” in *Living Gender after Communism*, eds. Janet E. Johnson and Jean C. Robinson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 100.

20 — Poststructuralism probably became the most influential and well-known theoretical apparatus among Eastern European intellectuals. It comes as no surprise when we realize that the historical roots of poststructuralism reach to interwar structuralism that originated and developed in the countries later belonging to the Eastern bloc, namely Russia and Czechoslovakia.

*at the beginning, we didn't make many interpretational mistakes as a consequence of insufficient theoretical knowledge and that we didn't get entangled in the web of essentialism. However, part of art history is also a refining of theoretical thinking, including revising, redefining, and rewriting art on the background of new studies and new research [...] One of the fundamental assets of the Slovak art and art theory of the 1990s was the interest in "Otherness" that is linked to the end of grand narratives and the revision of linear art history written by men.*<sup>21</sup>

"Otherness" has been more piercingly inspected by Eastern European curators and theorists as well as artists during the last ten years. Becoming, at least in imagination, part of the "West" after 1989, coping with increasing social and economic turmoil and with local national and ethnic tensions that culminated even in war conflicts, the broadening gap between social classes, and, finally, the entry of many former Soviet satellites into the European Union, brought about social and cultural diversification but also new forms of nationalism and neo-conservatism. Thus gender "difference" in visual art started to be confronted with "othernesses" of different kinds, including that of race,<sup>22</sup> ethnicity,<sup>23</sup> and sexuality. From this perspective, the development of an Eastern European feminist and gender agenda slowly starts to have a multicultural overtone similar to that in the West, albeit on a much smaller level.

A remarkable example of gender critique related to cultural difference in Eastern Europe and of "othering" in this part of the "old continent" was the show *Schengen Women*, which took place in SKUC Gallery in Ljubljana in 2008. Curated by Zdenka Badovinac, the exhibition presented the works of several women artists and one male artist who challenged the dominating ideas and stereotypes about women

from postcommunist Europe in the mirror of popular concepts of Europeanism. It was focused on the art and life of women on the "wrong" side of the border, framing their roles in historical and contemporary context, and reflecting on the impact of the Schengen Treaty, which redefined the boundaries of Europe, in terms of gender difference. In her curatorial statement, Badovinac explained:

*In the collective consciousness of Europeans, European identity relates primarily to Western culture and male creativity. Undeniably we still know less about European women artists than we do about their male counterparts, and when it comes to Eastern European women artists, this is true twofold. Unfamiliarity with otherness inevitably leads people to form ideas and stereotypes. Both historically and currently there are many Eastern European women artists who have problematized the various ideas about and stereotypical images of Eastern European women, from the androgynous partisan and communist to the poor woman who does not match up to the Western media images, and, in the time of the transition, to the refugee and prostitute. The view of the Other often treats the Eastern European woman merely as an object, formerly a victim of the regime, currently a victim of unbridled capitalism.*<sup>24</sup>

In the exhibition, Badovinac introduced an important paradigm of "active Otherness" that, in contrast to the view from outside as embodied by "passive Otherness," reveals the actual circumstances of the status and role of Eastern European women in the past and present alike. This "active Otherness" that challenges hegemonic power structures—global as well as local—can, according to the curator, resist the colonializing and chauvinistic gaze of Western Europe on women from the "East" but also subvert the sometimes similarly patronizing image of the East as pictured by Western feminists.<sup>25</sup>

Another aspect of the interest in identity politics that has appeared central to many Eastern European art theorists and artists and influenced the local gender and feminist debates in the new millennium is the sexual "Other." It comes as no surprise that the strongest voices that have been "queering" the heterosexual

21 — This quote comes from Katarína Rusnáková's answer to my informal questionnaire about feminist art and art history in the postcommunist era that I compiled as a fellow at the Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts, U.S., and sent to a number of women scholars and curators who deal with gender and feminism in the summer of 2003.

22 — The main "Eastern" European racial "Other" continues to be the Roma population that, in some countries—including Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia—comprises a significant part of the local population. A remarkable video project focused on Roma women as well as men was made by Slovak artist Pavlína Fichta-Čierna.

23 — How identity politics is often accompanied by violence and how it imprints onto gender issues was demonstrated by several women artists from the former Yugoslavia (including Milica Tomić and Sanja Iveković), a country that was hit by violent and dramatic ethnic conflict after 1989.

24 — From the press release.

25 — See also Jovana Stokic, "Un-Doing Monoculture: Women Artists from the 'Blind Spot of Europe'—the Former Yugoslavia," *ARTMargins* (March 10, 2006).

canon of both society and art came from those countries where sexual minorities were—and still are—publicly ostracized, and where homosexuality is considered to be a crime by most of the population. It is striking that one is confronted here again with the notion of active but also activist “Otherness” that breaks away from the traditional heteronormative gender roles, including patriarchal masculinity.

Thus, in relation to new forms of control, oppression, and lack of freedom—whether they come from the side of the free-market economy and consumerism, discriminatory legislative norms, or the Church—a new paradigm of political art is born in Eastern Europe. Politics, including gender, sexual, and body politics, for so long considered here to be an antithesis of art, are slowly becoming an integral part of it. As Paweł Leszkowicz and Tomasz Kitliński wrote with a dose of anger and avant-garde idealism with regard to Polish art and society:

*In gender-oppressive countries, the fragile problem of sexual difference and sexual individualism offers for art the margins for a subversive edge and revolutionary force. It is precisely this transforming energy that in Central/Eastern Europe is still contained in the sexual rights that makes the subject here so different from its Western incarnation [...] We would like to suggest that the connection between art and sexual minorities offers an avant-garde cultural position not only in Poland, but also in Eastern Europe in general, since the subject is still politically ignited and commercially unspoiled [...] Sexual dissidence is a new kind of dissidence in Eastern Europe. The revolution is happening now.*<sup>26</sup>

Although the postwar history of art in Eastern Europe was affected by the prudishness of the communist regime that censored any suggestion of sexuality, and although artists themselves were deprived of both mental and physical freedom (while the artist without mind epitomized a loyalty to the regime, the artist without body represented a universal, genderless category of art), the body has been occupying one of the central positions in Eastern

European art since its rebirth at the end of the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> While body politics in art was strongly influenced by the repressions of the totalitarian regime prior to 1989 and, as such, left little space for gender issues, the meaning of the body on the Eastern European art scene changed fundamentally after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The sacrificed body that previously symbolized ideological oppression has transformed into the “battleground” on which sexual and gender politics are played, and where many taboo issues, including, for instance, pornography<sup>28</sup> or abortion rights, are examined.<sup>29</sup> It is true that the problem of sexual and gender(ed) identity or androgyny can be traced back to the 1970s in the Eastern European art scene. However, what used to be narcissistically oriented inward is, suddenly, reoriented outward, toward the public, the social strata and politics, often touching upon issues of newly and often chaotically established capitalism: advertisements, consumer fetishism, TV projects in the style of *Big Brother*, etc. As the widely discussed work by Tanja Ostojić *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* (2000–05) symptomatically demonstrated, the body is a social body; it is a “site” of confrontation rather than contemplation.

Although some feminist authors in Eastern Europe have been appropriating established Western feminist methodologies and applying them to the local art context, many others have realized that transmitting the theoretical discourse directly from one social-cultural milieu to another has its limits and can have ruinous consequences on their own critical potential. It is true that many gender issues exist on a global scale, but their semantic nuances change from place to place. As many thinkers in the East emphasize, there are different semantic and cultural “framings” which produce different gender meanings of similar visual signs and representations. In other words, they have

27 — See *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). This book introduces some eighty body artists from various parts of Eastern Europe and was published in conjunction with a major retrospective exhibition of body art held at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana in 1998.

28 — Among the first projects that reflected on pornography was the catalogue *Erotics and Sexuality in Hungarian Art/Erotika és szexualitás a magyar képzőművészetben*, ed. Gábor András (Budapest: Liga, 1999).

29 — For an elaborated analysis of body politics in art, see Izabela Kowalczyk, *Ciało i władza: Polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90 (Body and Power: Polish Critical Art of the 1990s)* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2002). See also Agata Jakubowska, *Ciało kobiece w pracach polskich artystek (Woman's Body in the Work of Polish Women Artists)* (Cracow: Universitas, 2004); Ileana Pintilie, “The Public and the Private Body in Contemporary Romanian Art,” *ARTMargins* (July 7, 2007).

26 — Paweł Leszkowicz and Tomasz Kitliński, “Escaping the Heteromatrix: Polish Public Art Against Homophobia,” *Præsens*, no. 4 (2003): 42–43. See also Paweł Leszkowicz and Tomek Kitliński, *Miłość i demokracja: rozważania o kwestii homoseksualnej w Polsce (Love and Democracy: Reflections on the Homosexual Question in Poland)* (Cracow: Aureus, 2005); Paweł Leszkowicz, “The Queer Story of Polish Art and Subjectivity,” *ARTMargins* (April 10, 2006).

perceived that the collective narratives and languages of signification need to be disrupted on the level of imposed internal/domestic as well as external/international discourses.

When, for instance, Agata Jakubowska interpreted the work of a Polish woman artist of the 1970s, Natalia LL (whose relationship to feminism was, however, rather superficial and accidental), she convincingly demonstrated the limitations and inadequacy of adopting Western feminist interpretational models in the East. She pointed out that while Western feminists—and the Polish theorists who took over their argumentation—considered Natalia LL's project *Consumer Art* an “exquisite example of a deceitful fight with the image of a ‘vamp murdering men—a theme which was invented by men for a woman,’” they missed the “difference of the social and political, or rather economic situation [that] could not occur in Western discourse.”<sup>30</sup> Jakubowska concentrated on a remarkable detail used by Natalia LL in the series of photographic self-portraits: a banana sliding back and forth in the artist's erotically open mouth. Although Jakubowska acknowledged its erotic charge and allusion to phallic power, she emphasized that bananas were a deficient and exclusive commodity in Poland (as they were for most parts of former Eastern Europe) associated with the unreachable capitalist West, and that licking and sucking the exotic fruit thus symbolized both sexual and consumerist seduction.<sup>31</sup>

With the background of this case, it becomes not only obvious that feminist art in the “East” is different from feminist art of the mainstream “Anglo-Saxon” style, but also that feminist thinking and writing about visual art in this region mirrors its social, cultural, and political specificities. As Czech art historian and curator Zuzana Štefková writes, despite the absence of the wide feminist base available in the West, it is not impossible for Eastern European artists and curators to generate and develop “an

authentically feminist art [and theory]; it is only necessary to take into account that it will [always] be feminism, or rather feminisms modified by a local experience.”<sup>32</sup>

When Aneta Szyłak retrospectively reflected on her curatorial concept for the show *Architectures of Gender: Contemporary Women's Art in Poland* in New York in 2003, she wrote that “the aim was to create the channel for art from Poland, barely known in New York, and to make it a part of the wider artistic discourse, without playing up the Central-European exotics and breaking through the clichés about ‘Polish feminism.’”<sup>33</sup> She thus formulated a crucial task for Eastern and Western feminists alike: to discard gender but also feminist stereotypes and prejudices about the “difference” that exists on both sides of the long-demolished yet mentally still-standing Wall.

In order to do so, however, we all need to do a lot of work. We—in the East—should learn how to speak for ourselves on the global level instead of either conforming to the Western feminist “idiom” (and thus playing the role of belated yet teachable “sisters”) or maintaining the notion of art as a genderless, universal, and almost divine activity. They—in the West—should, once again, question the sustainability of their privileged “West-centric” feminisms and of their distorted image of Eastern European women generated during the Cold War. When the work is done, perhaps it will be time to start thinking about “us” without geographically differentiating pronouns. However, even then, feminism should not become a homogenous category. As Katy Deepwell noted a couple of years ago: “It's impossible to continue to think of feminism as a single entity when opposing it to the mainstream or patriarchy of the institutionalized teaching of art history.”<sup>34</sup>

Excerpted from *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*. Edited by Bojana Pejč.

Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien; Cologne: Walther König, 2010.

30 — Agata Jakubowska, “The Attractive Banality of Natalia LL's ‘Consumer Art’ (1972–1975),” *Nordlit*, no. 21 (2007): 245–246.

31 — For the site- or culture-specific dimension of feminist readings in relation to representation of the female body and eroticism dominated by the privileged desiring male subject, see also Leonida Kovač, “Čie telo—čia túžba?” (“Whose Body, Whose Desire?”), *Rodové štúdiá v umení a kultúre / Gender Studies in Arts and Culture* (Bratislava: Soros Center of Contemporary Art, 2000).

32 — Zuzana Štefková, “‘Your Body Is a Battleground.’ Tělesnost a gender v současném českém a slovenském umění” (“Your Body Is a Battleground”: Body and Gender in Contemporary Czech and Slovak Art”), in *Dějiny umění v české společnosti (Art History in Czech Society)*, ed. Milena Bartlová (Prague: Argo, 2004), 63.

33 — Aneta Szyłak, “Show Space: Curating Art in and from East Central Europe,” *ARTMargins* (November 12, 2003).

34 — From my email correspondence with Katy Deepwell of July 25, 2003.

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# The Body, Ideology, Masculinity, and Some Blind Spots in Postcommunism

BRANISLAV DIMITRIJEVIĆ AND BRANISLAVA ANDJELKOVIĆ

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## Introduction (Jürgen's Journey)

There is an anecdote we have been told by a distinguished professor of law who traveled late in 1987 from Belgrade, via Bangkok, to some far eastern city where he was to attend “one of those conferences like in David Lodge’s novels,” as he would put it. On the plane he shared the company of a German gentleman who indulged in a long monologue because he was impressed by his co-traveler’s knowledge of his mother tongue. As sometimes happens on planes, the German (his name was Jürgen) recounted the story of his life, which may be summarized as follows: Jürgen was born and raised in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and had on three occasions tried to flee that country, putting his life in danger and himself in prison; when he ultimately succeeded, he managed to swim over the Danube from Hungary and found himself in Yugoslavia, at that time a well-known transit space for Eastern European emigrants. Then, after spending a period of time in Western Germany, and earning some money, he found the cheapest way (via Yugoslavia, again) to transport himself to Thailand in order to fulfill one of the greatest desires of his life: an Oriental sex tour. After telling us this anecdote, the liberally minded professor commented: “It was not clear to me whether I should admire this man for his bravery and determination in escaping from one of the most repressive regimes in Europe, or whether I should despise him as someone whose principal driving force on his road to the ‘free Western world’ had been his desire to fuck underage Thai prostitutes.” Strangely, in 1987 this dilemma was quite understandable; after the fall of the Wall, it has appeared less so.

This anecdote raises a few issues that will be discussed here. These relate to those very actions undertaken by this man in relation to both the major ideologies that prevailed in Europe before and after the final collapse of the Eastern bloc, as well as to a consideration of “the techniques of the body” in participating in these ideologies, or in attempting to transgress them, as they occur in some aspects of cultural production. In modernity, the notion of transgression has been considered as a

cultural term: the surrealists, for example, tended to transfer psychologically disruptive conditions into ones which were significant for “cultural revolution” (surrealists were proud to call themselves fetishists, for example). In his “Hommage à Georges Bataille,” Michel Foucault wrote: “Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, *even its origin*; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses.” And also: “The limit and transgression depend on each other . . . a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.” In the case of his first action (fleeing the communist GDR), transgression has therefore occurred (borders were not absolutely uncrossable, the action involved was a real-body event), but can we claim by analogy that his second action (the sex tour to Thailand) was a transgression as well, since Foucault is pretty determined to disassociate transgression from ethical questions and from anything “aroused by negative associations.” The borders of ethical norms that prohibit sex with minors are based upon virtual limits (Foucault’s illusions and shadows) that are, arguably, also quite crossable. However, this dilemma appears to be a false one, since what is sensed to be disturbing here is that Jürgen’s journey to Thailand is an intrinsic part of his original action, the driving force behind it, an origin of a *fantasy*. So what is important in this case, and what will be argued later as important for the establishment of a cultural identity of ex-communist societies in relation to the West, is the construction of that fantasy that finally emerges as an integral part of the ideological space towards which these societies aspired.

If his relation to the ideology of communism lies in a clear antagonism described/inscribed

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1 — Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” [“Hommage à Georges Bataille,” 1963], in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 33–34 (our italics).

by/in his body, his relation towards the West seems muddled insofar as this imaginary relation is conceived as if it is beyond ideology, as if belonging to a “post-ideological” realm. The origin of this fantasy structure hosts a desire for two opposed concepts: one of *total freedom* (as differentiated from communist restrictions) and one of *total order* (as differentiated from the significantly irrational and clearly unpragmatic features of communist rule). In order to come closer to considering Jürgen’s journey as symptomatic of post-communist body politics—and in the further argument of the context explored by many Eastern European artists who use the body as their point of reference—it is necessary to remind ourselves of some theoretical propositions concerning the inscription of ideologies in the behavior of individual and collective bodies. As Slavoj Žižek has noted, there is a crucial distinction between Foucault’s and Althusser’s approaches with regard to the ideological mechanisms of the interdependence of “inner belief” and the external behavior of subjects in ideology. Whereas Foucault abandons ideology when he talks about the disciplinary procedures of “micro-power” and thus designates the point at which “power inscribes itself into the body directly, bypassing ideology,” Althusser “conceives these micro-procedures as parts of the ISA [Ideological State Apparatuses]; that is to say, as mechanisms which, in order to be operative, to ‘seize’ the individual, always-already presuppose . . . the transferential relationship of the individual towards . . . the ideological big Other in whom the interpellation originates.”<sup>2</sup> Apart from Althusser’s well-known definition of ideology as a *representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence*, at this point one should also look closely at another thesis accompanying this, which says: *ideology has a material existence*. Althusser in effect argues that where a single subject is concerned, “the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.”<sup>3</sup>

How is Jürgen’s journey defined by ideology in the very act that seeks to transgress it (i.e., its moral and legal restrictions)? The removal of the Iron Curtain has altered the dominating

political imagination of both East and West and, as Susan Buck-Morss has argued, a certain kind of industrial dreamworld has dissipated: in the East, the dream-form was a *utopia of production*, whereas in the West it was a *utopia of consumption*.<sup>4</sup> Both shared the optimistic vision of a mass society and therefore both served as *mise-en-scènes* of desire, as fantasy spaces. Which had attracted (and very gradually disappointed) Western European leftist intellectuals, and members of the working class much less; and, on the other side, various individuals in communist societies: liberals, right-wing dissidents, independent artists, thriving sportsmen, as well as people like Jürgen. Interestingly, societies of the communist bloc appeared to be more fragmented and pluralist with regard to their fantasy than their Western “counterparts,” but the common denominator was simply a desire to consume, to revive the commodity fetishism that had been suppressed as a dangerous illusion by Marxist-Leninist teachings, to conceal traces of labor from the surfaces of the commodities they aspired to possess. Western ideologies detected that their own rituals in the fantasies of the Eastern Europeans—and fantasies are, according to Freud, driven either by *ambitious* or *erotic* wishes—may serve as the most useful tool for “liberal hegemony.” The utopia of consumption prevailed as a dream-form among the newly liberated Eastern Europeans in as much as it had been fetishized (devoid of any social relations, emptied of labor) and ideologically presented in its practices/rituals: shopping, traveling, initiating ambitions, and so forth. Althusser illustrates his thesis that ideology always exists in an apparatus and its practices with the formula he borrows from the writings of Blaise Pascal that inverts “the order of the notional schema of ideology.” This formula says: *Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe*.<sup>5</sup> Ideology thus resides in the body and its actions, and for the purposes of our argument, Pascal’s formula may be turned into “consume, and you will believe in Western democracies.” How symptomatic it was, for example, that German unification was so rapidly achieved without any serious inquiry into the public sphere of the new state,<sup>6</sup> and that any attempt to find at least a discussible

4 — Susan Buck-Morss, “The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe,” *October*, no. 73 (Summer 1995), p. 3.

5 — Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” p. 127.

6 — See Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere,” *October*, no. 73 (Summer 1995), pp. 27–54.

2 — Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology,” in Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 13.

3 — Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” [1970], in *ibid.*, pp. 127–128.



alternative for the GDR had been marginalized by giving people the power to consume, before new strategies of production or any political agenda were outlined.

However, consumption in capitalism is not limited only by the financial capacity of an individual, but also by a social contract that says that relations between people do not correspond to the relations between commodities; on the contrary, it is a relation between “free” people, each “following his or her proper egoistic interest.” The limit is therefore a controlled performative element of liberal societies: act/consume as much as it pleases you but only as long as another free individual is not harmed by your actions. But, as we all know, in capitalism to harm does not mean to exploit. “With the establishment of bourgeois society,” as Žižek understands Marx who, according to a puzzling remark by Lacan, invented the notion of symptom, “the relations of domination and servitude are *repressed*: formally, we are apparently concerned with free subjects whose interpersonal relations are discharged of all fetishism; the repressed truth—that of the persistence of domination and servitude—emerges in a symptom which subverts the ideological appearance of equality, freedom, and so on . . . ‘Instead of appearing at all events as their own mutual relations, the social relations between individuals are disguised under the shape of social relations between things’—here we have a precise definition of the hysterical symptom, of the ‘hysteria of conversion’ proper to capitalism.”<sup>7</sup>

### Atrophy of Prohibition

Has Jürgen then simply failed to recognize liberal capitalism or has he properly understood it? According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the hysterical symptom is caused by the repressed memory of something too disturbing (which could be both shameful and exciting) to be allowed into consciousness. Freud was quite skeptical about the possibility of recovering the repressed event (which he said may happen only temporarily and is promptly reinstated), although, as psychoanalysis evolved, the memory of the real event came to be replaced by the fantasy of the forbidden wish. We may therefore argue that the form of the fantasy of the forbidden wish is the only form for our knowledge of the symptom as it is: an inert stain that “cannot be included in the circuit of discourse,

of social bond network, but is at the same time a positive condition of it.”<sup>8</sup> Anyway, if Jürgen has detected *domination/servitude* as a repressed content of capitalism, as well as a “form” of his fantasy, then he has understood its logic and desired to represent his move as a transgression, like he did with his original action. On the other hand, if he has not detected this repressed content (like some “hidden kernel” behind the form he perceives) and acted as if there was nothing forbidden in his wish (and by judging from a *body- and image-space*—to borrow Benjamin’s concept—of post-industrial media-capitalism, he could have got that impression easily), he has not committed a transgression but has understood the logic of the system. Transgression has therefore become a secondary issue, and Foucault’s formulations will have to be abated pretty soon; this will be clarified in the next section.

So, what does this all tell us about the connection between Jürgen’s previous experience in escaping from the GDR and his journey to Thailand? It has been always overstated that Eastern European societies have to get through a (difficult) period of transition in order to abandon their ex-communist habits (bureaucratic disorganization, laziness, low quality education, and so forth) and to learn how liberal capitalism really works. It appeared that countries pursued different roads in accordance to their own pre-communist traditions: say, either a post-Habsburg Commonwealth of Central European States or an Eastern Orthodox symbolic solidarity, with certain variations, naturally. These countries were soon divided into good capitalist countries, with good memories of their pre-communist traditions, and those in which communist practices and rituals still dominate the minds of the majority of people. In their interpretation of communist ideologies, Western liberals show a surprisingly Althusserian approach—theoretically (or, in its “content”), communism collapsed, but it is still alive as long as the ideology resides in the bodies and their practices. The twist of fate may happen even to those who share beliefs and ideas in direct opposition to real-socialist proclamations: their ideas may be pro-Western, but their bodies and rituals are still communist.

The professor’s dilemma set out at the beginning of the text (“to admire or to despise”) is based upon a conviction that communism is so fundamentally disastrous that it tended,

7 — Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 26.

8 — Ibid, p. 75.

even among people with admirable beliefs, to generate an inappropriate access to the Western world via its most dubious aspects. However, he resisted recognizing that the whole issue belonged entirely to the repression of domination/servitude, a symptom that Jürgen recognized as the Real of capitalism. Fantasy is characterized by “the arranging of, a setting out of, desire; a veritable *mise-en-scène* of desire,” and “the pleasure of fantasy lies in the setting out, not in the having of the objects.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, we can argue that for Jürgen capitalism itself is a *mise-en-scène* of his desire and not the act of having a prostitute, and that having a prostitute in Thailand also belongs to the very foundations of capitalist development, i.e., to colonialism and its accompanying popular and cultural fantasies. Also, here one may try to make a distinction between the East and the West where a stereotypical plain *male fantasy*<sup>10</sup> like his has to resort to a sub-political setting, an actual brothel, for example. However, what is more important for the further argument is the very unease shown by the professor in exercising his own political standpoint in relation to what he heard. At stake is not his disappointment in hearing the content of such an odious fantasy, but the very fact that he was told it. From Freud’s text “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” one can conclude that it is not the content of fantasies that may indicate some illness but the act, even obligation, of telling them, and “this is our best source of knowledge, and we have since found good reason to suppose that our patients tell us nothing that we might not also hear from healthy people.”<sup>11</sup> Fantasies are normally concealed from other people, and, as Freud says, even if a person “were to communicate them to us he could give us no pleasure by his disclosures.”

Therefore, the question always remains: who are you and why are you telling me this? Freud believed that only “creative writers”

accomplished the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion connected with “the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others.” As opposed to displeasure caused by a person who forcefully opens his fantasies to us, our enjoyment of someone’s “creative effort” proceeds from “a liberation of tensions in our minds.” A lot of contemporary avant-garde art<sup>12</sup> (both in the West and in the East) is about provoking the feeling of repulsion, anxiety, or displeasure, but these issues also appear as a part of a specific tradition in communist Europe of so-called non-conformist art, particularly art based on the artist’s own body. Recently we have witnessed a recurrent interest in this art practice, which has resulted in many critical essays and exhibitions.<sup>13</sup> Many artistic actions during communism involved forms of transgressive behavior (usually interpreted as a cultural undercurrent of indebtedness these artists had towards the 1920s local and international avant-garde movements and particularly Surrealism) located in the body and directed towards the body, among which the crossing of the line (endangering one’s own body) had been a peculiar form of statement about personal freedom and the possibility of evading ideological prohibitions by transferring the emphasis from an impenetrable social-political sphere to a personal political sphere, knowingly or not knowingly following the famous 1970s feminist dictum: the personal is political. Artists like Jan Mlčoch and Petr Štembera in Prague, Tibor Hajas in Budapest, Marina Abramović in Belgrade, and Autoperforationsartisten in East Berlin brought their own bodies in jeopardy, directing the act of transgression towards the Real of one’s own body and its limits.

Although an emphasis of many contemporary artists in ex-communist Europe remains on the body, one has to note two crucial distinctions these artists make. One is directed towards their predecessors and another towards the art that happened to be en vogue in the West at the time of political changes in

9 — Elizabeth Cowie, “Fantasia” [1984], in Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie, eds., *The Woman in Question* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 159.

10 — According to Theweleit’s “classification,” this fantasy lies in the very origin of market capitalism, when in the 14th century the first merchants traveling “overseas” began structuring an idealized female body offered as a final aim of their journeys, “a body that was to be more enticing than all the rest of the world put together. It was the fountain men drank from after crossing the arid terrain of their adventures, the mirror in which they sought to recognize themselves.” Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 296.

11 — Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” [1907], in Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 436–443.

12 — We still have to maintain the notion of the avant-garde, since most of the current artistic production (and quite notably so in Eastern Europe) proceeds from a completely different position of artistry for general pleasure. In the East, this notion has its inherited imago in the concept of non-official art.

13 — The most specific of these exhibitions being *Body and the East* in Ljubljana in 1998. The curator of the exhibition, Zdenka Badovinac, in her opening essay states that the term “body art,” as a general phenomenon but more as a specifically Eastern European occurrence, includes very different art practices based on the artist’s own body as the main bearer of various socio-political, existential, and cosmological contents. See *Body and the East: Od šestdesetih let do danes/From the 1960s to the Present*, exh. cat. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1998), p. 13.



Petr Štembera. *Joining*. 1975/2004. Gelatin silver print, 15¾ x 11" (40 x 28 cm). Courtesy the artist

Eastern Europe. Firstly, to voluntarily and seriously endanger one's own body has become a meaningless statement: whether the origin of this is in an acceptance of conformism as an overwhelmingly dominating will to oppose (i.e., bodies behaving in accordance with a "utopia of consumption" ideology) or simply in the recognition of a failure of these statements/investments to make an impact other than a personal one, especially in the realm of new media that has been overburdened with images of violent conflicts, disasters, and disease. Secondly, to represent images of mutilation, dismemberment, contamination, castration, or to use/document materials such as shit, vomit, rotten organic refuse (as has been the case with the trend of "abjection" in contemporary Western art), has been seen as too benign, alienated, depoliticized, and even cold and fundamentally unsatisfactory in its tendency to impair the feeling of safety among the bourgeoisie.

The notion of transgression, as declared in modernism, may be debased to characterize a system whose "so-called liberation," as Philippe Sollers put it, is only "the mask of an intensified repression": "As if the absence of resistance made it impossible to anchor thought, leaving it to a formless, derisory gratuitousness in which it is incapable of understanding itself in its movement."<sup>14</sup> In real socialism there was evidently no "absence of resistance" as defined by Sollers: artists in many countries had to confine their activities to closed places and secretive events. Even in slightly liberalized societies, like Tito's Yugoslavia used to be, open-air body actions like those performed by the (naked) Tom Gotovac were registered by the police authorities. Gotovac was frequently questioned, although never jailed, given that there was a significant problem as to whether to confirm a breach of bourgeois moral norms (nakedness in public space) as anti-socialist behavior. After 1989, communist restrictions were no longer in place; some societies adopted standard bourgeois norms and some did not (notably Serbia), and, most significantly, the *dreamworld*<sup>15</sup> has changed. Before this change, the ideological construct of a "utopia of production" had plunged into "all pores of society" (to use some glorious communist jargon which cultivates the idea of society as an organism), and artists-in-opposition had also belonged to

it. As Bojana Pejić has remarked, these artists applied the terminology which defined the body as material in their works, suggesting "that the artist understood his or her body as 'something' which is not ready made, but that which needed to be shaped, worked with"<sup>16</sup> But how does this function after the transformation of the dreamworld?

### Consuming Body and Masculinity

Let us take our first example from the expanding art scene of post-communist Europe, the exceptional work of the Bulgarian artist Rassim Kristev. His work appears to be an exact rendering of the principles stated above: the artist has been literally building his body in the gym until the desired appearance of meticulous muscular development is achieved; this project of a systematic re-shaping has been documented on video tape. He has also used his developing body in different forms of public display, primarily in advertising posters praising Rassim as "Bulgarian no. 1," showing himself in the company of beautiful girls as well as carrying the insignia of the new capitalist class—speaking naked into a cellular telephone, for instance. It can be argued that Rassim connects two forms of body politics: the communist insistence on sport activities through strenuous effort (which in Bulgaria particularly meant success in body-strength sports such as weight-lifting, wrestling, or boxing) and emerging capitalism's orientation towards fitness centers, gyms, and designed bodies as integral parts of a consumer culture. In both cases, body-building was seen as a means of overcoming restrictions: one of the rare ways in which one could be granted permission to travel outside communist countries (arguably the greatest fantasy of a communist subject, as seen with Jürgen)<sup>17</sup> was to achieve the career of a successful sports person; on the other hand, one of the possibilities of overcoming poverty at a time of transition is to become handsome or beautiful—simply, to shape your body as a commodity.

But there is a difference. Western capitalism has never been as body-oriented as it is now; there are even some fascist elements in this. The body has been defined in its dual role: the body that consumes and the body that is

16 — Bojana Pejić, "Unmaking Sex: Bodies of/in Communism," in *Wounds: Between Democracy and Redemption in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1998), p. 74.

17 — There is an old Russian joke epitomizing this fantasy. Two friends meet in the Moscow tube on their way from work. "I wish to go to Paris again," says one. "I didn't know you had been in Paris?!" "No, but I had the same wish before."

14 — As quoted by Jean-Louis Houdebine in "L'enjeu Bataille," *Art Press*, no. 204 (July–August 1995), p. 42.

15 — See Buck-Morss, "The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe."

consumed. The nonconformist artists of the 1970s, to whom Bojana Pejić refers, refused consumerism as a fantasy and aspiration (aligning themselves thus with their leftist colleagues in the West) and used the endurance of the body as a site of confrontation with the principles of conformism/consumerism of capitalism: the positive aspect of working with the body was to achieve supposed “higher spiritual states,” and the means to achieve this were excessive physical effort, use of drugs, intoxication, self-injury, exposure to uncontrollable hazards, etc. The body was therefore used to produce some form of transcendence. Rassim’s body, on the other hand, is meant to be consumed: his project both delivers and subverts a collective fantasy in accordance with a winning utopia.

How does Rassim communicate this fantasy? In Freud’s text, the creative writer (an inadequate English translation for the German word *Dichter*) achieves this through the aesthetic pleasure granted to his audience, through the notion of “fore-pleasure,” which links it to sexual pleasure. The first example Freud used is stimulation of this kind of pleasure in genres of “pulp fiction,” with its invulnerable heroes always solving their life crises and winning the girl, i.e., fulfilling both their ambitions and erotic wishes, as an open presentation of the author’s own fantasies. These forms of “creative writing” are, at first glance, miles away from body art and its reception: illusion is central for the rendering of fantasies (“I know this isn’t real, but . . .”), whereas in body art reality is everything, actions are accepted only if they really happen (“If, and only if, I know this is for real . . .”). However, Rassim works with his body precisely in order to create an illusion, not an illusion of action (he is a body artist, and the emergence of body art has proven to be the most consequent alternative to the predominance of virtual “Photoshop” art), but an illusion of setting. He acts as a pulp fiction hero; he merges his and his hero’s Ego into one single act of “critical narcissism,” and he arranges the *mise-en-scène* of masculine desire. And in Freudian terms, the Ego is “a mental projection of the surface of the body.” Contemporary body artists attempt to observe the Freudian Ego from a differentiated point of view through emulating, infiltrating, and virusing their paranoid environments (and, yes, changing the status of masculinity certainly generates paranoia). Paranoiacs’ speech “does not coincide with their identity; they speak as if they were an other, or simply an object in a world of objects.” In this process, as Victor Burgin maintains, they

lose the illusory “sense of transcendence that would allow them to position themselves at the center of their own space.”<sup>18</sup>

As for the issue of masculinity, let us employ an observation by Abigail Solomon-Godeau from a recent study on the male nude in French art in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and its implications for the mass culture of the late 20th century: “Cut loose, as it were, from a presumed isomorphism with biological sex, the concept of masculinity has ceded its taken-for-granted status, its previous transparency. It is this loss of transparency that is indicated by the term ‘discursive visibility,’ signaling the ways that masculinity can now be approached as a subject for literary or artistic investigation, a disciplinary object within feminist theory, gender studies . . . Accompanying this discursive visibility, we are confronted with newly minted representations of masculinity that seem particularly feminized in that the male body is presented as an object for erotic contemplation. This I believe to be of significant historical importance insofar as it was historically the *withdrawal* of the unclothed male body from dominant representational systems and the concomitant hypervisibility of the female body that has characterized and secured the visual economy of bourgeois culture.”<sup>19</sup>

Solomon-Godeau continues in “hearkening back” to Laura Mulvey’s much cited distinction between men as bearers of the gaze and women as objects of it, a division said to seem currently in flux. What may consequently also be in flux is Mulvey’s distinction between women as *bearers of meaning* and men as *makers of meaning*, a symbolic order in which man can “live out his fantasies through linguistic command.” In societies in which the questions of gender had not been researched (due to the alleged gender equality-by-decree of real socialism), a certain amount of backlash has been endorsed by women in order to leave men with their “linguistic command,” which has actually resulted in giving them full authority. Many educated women in Eastern Europe would fully reject being identified as feminists, simply because they adopt a concept of “feminism” as it is constructed by the male gaze (feminism is redundant, feminists are ugly and frustrated, etc.). In that economy it does not come as a surprise that

18 — Victor Burgin, “Paranoiac Space,” in Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 128–129.

19 — Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 18.



Arsen Savadov. From the series Donbass Chocolate. 1997. Gelatin silver print, 57 × 55" (145 × 140 cm).  
Courtesy the artist

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the rather scarce, representational/political issues of gender are often focused on in works by male artists. This includes also acts that might be seen as transgressive, but which are actually investigations into conditions of masculinity in transition. The series of photographs of coal miners dressed in ballerinas' costumes by the Ukrainian artists Arsen Savadov and Oleksandr Kharchenko are intense, distressing, and acrid statements on the inadequacy of masculinity in impoverished patriarchal societies (*Deepinsider*, 1998). These photographs display masculinity as a combination of stringent anxiety and debilitated grotesque, and do not aim to give any suggestion of either travesty or transgressive sexuality. On the other hand, in a series of posters by Belgrade artist Zoran Naskovski, San Francisco is used as a *mise-en-scène* for displaying himself in drag, and to this image of underachieved private transgression is added a much more scandalous declaration that reads: "Help Keep Serbia Beautiful" (1998).

Even some women artists have chosen to address issues of gender by exploring representations of masculinity. Most notably, the Polish artist Katarzyna Kozyra who, for the purposes of filming the video for her installation *The Men's Bathhouse* (1999), disguised herself as a man, attaching facial hair and even a rubber penis, to be allowed inside the bathhouse. However, her approach is opposed to that of male artists who used their "linguistic command" to hijack the feminist agenda, or at least to benefit from its discursive applicability. She has moved from some particular social issues (the already mentioned artists usually refer to the particular conditions in their own countries) and has focused on empowering herself with the gaze, as she did with a false beard and a penis (evoking the practices of the 1970s feminist artist Ana Mendieta). She thus affirms that the gaze itself is a binding tool of patriarchy, which cannot be degraded if men choose to problematize only the means of their self-representation. Unaware that a woman was watching them, men behaved like men—they scratched their asses and balls, and cast their gazes—so they behaved "normally" regardless of the presence or the absence of the female glance; they remained bearers of the gaze despite their social condition. Her findings can be summarized in the following statement from one of her interviews: "Being a woman I felt terribly ashamed among men. Even though I was disguised, I felt totally naked."<sup>20</sup>

## To Lick or to Bite?

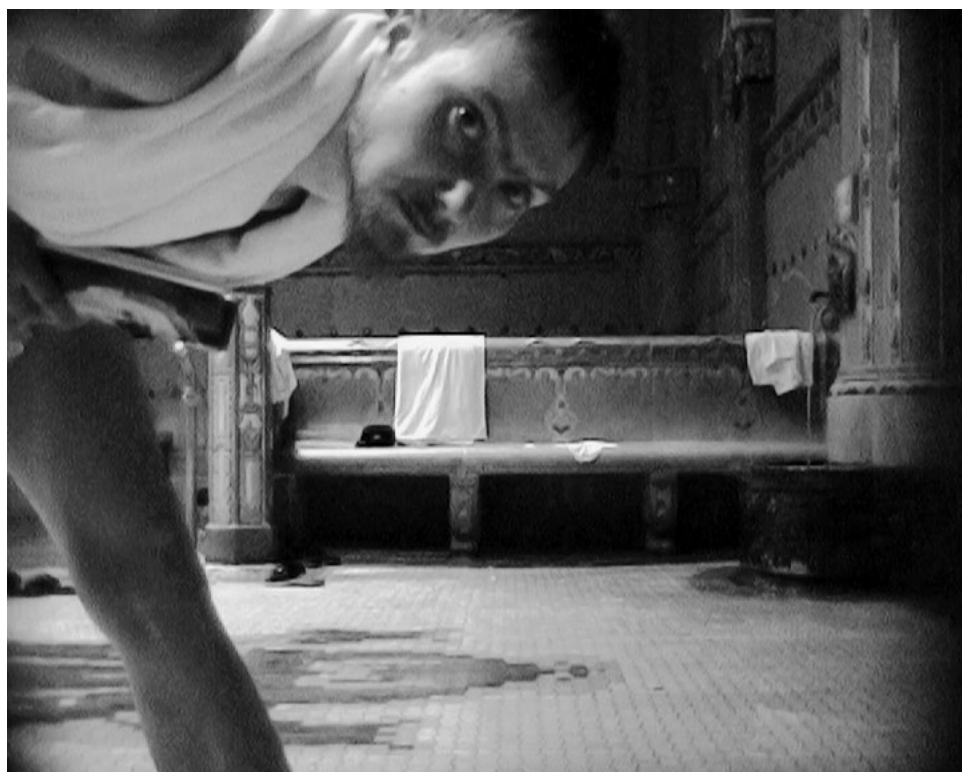
### (And Getting Too Personal)

Nonetheless, let us return to "male trouble." Solomon-Godeau makes a remark that, significantly, the male nude has been privileged in periods traditionally praised for fostering new freedoms and possibilities, and mentions fifth-century Athens, the Italian Renaissance, and the French Revolution (although she omits the examples of German and Italian fascism) as well as the contemporary Western world. However, it is clear that the male nude cannot be seen in isolation but must be considered alongside the female nude, which has been omnipresent even in less prosperous epochs. In periods of transition it is the same, and with the inclusion of the free market, the naked female body still remains a dominant category, precisely because of that market and its demands. Interestingly, Rasmussen Kristev's project employs the same kind of economy between the West and the East, by using the "Western support" of his French "financiers" who supply him with the required proteins and vitamins. By doing this he pronounces that his body is dependent on international capital.

As opposed to the first appreciations in the West of the independent art of the Eastern bloc when the issues at stake were generally the issues of life under communism (most notably captured in the work of Ilya Kabakov), art after the Wall has dissented from this and has plunged into reality, which has been characterized by its impatient collective fantasies. The abandonment of "exotic" (hi)stories about communism may disappoint those in the West who expected post-communist art to perform the role of the Other. This art production now hangs like a malignant tumor on the "healthy" body of liberalism and brings about new practices and uncertainties that may be visualized as politically useful tasks. The question of East and West has been fully outlined in many body art projects and most notably in the work of the best-known Russian artists at the moment, Oleg Kulik and Alexander Brener. Whilst Brener has played the role of "mischievous toddler" and has carried out actions that challenge sets of moral and legal rules (by destroying other artists' works, randomly throwing eggs at exhibition visitors, and so on), Kulik's "lewd" behavior has been structured upon his naked dog impersonations, acts of kynism through

Katarzyna Kozyra by Artur Żmijewski, in *Katarzyna Kozyra: The Men's Bathhouse*, exh. cat., 48th Venice Biennale, Polish Pavilion (Warsaw: Zachęta Gallery of Art, 1999), p. 77.





Katarzyna Kozyra. *The Men's Bathhouse*. 1999. Five-channel video installation.  
Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA and the artist

humiliation. Regarding his doggy experience, Kulik has put his finger on a key dilemma facing artists from Russia and Eastern Europe: “the question ‘to lick or to bite?’ equals Hamlet’s ‘to be or not to be’ . . . We are stray dogs, the homeless both abroad and at home—what we have been doing at home was treated as rotten shit, we were told that we deserved to be punished . . . But, there was at least something heroic about it. We felt there was some other place for us . . . And now, bang, the curtain falls . . . and our open arms seem dubious.”<sup>21</sup>

Licking and biting are the performative actions of two ideological positions, the first associated with successful transition and swift integration, and the second mostly with neo-Stalinist backlash. Only those who have this dilemma experience a traumatic ideological disintegration and the fragmentation of a unitary ideological body. But is this the only option for a non-integrated artist from the East? “To bite is meaningless and dangerous; to lick is meaningless and unpleasant,” asserts Kulik, and leaves just one, for him unacceptable, alternative: to remain *inactive*. Not much of a recipe for a body artist, it seems. However, for the performance by Serbian artist Tanja Ostojić, *Personal Space* (1996), it is the agonizing stillness of the naked body and its vulnerable exposure that inscribe a tormented subject incapable of insurgency when faced by an identification with the collective “we” for whose crimes this subject is asked to share not only shame but also guilt. Or is there something specifically “feminine” in this body politic, which distinguishes young Serbian women artists—like

Vesna Vesić crying openly to the camera in her first video (*Wash Me and I Shall Be Whiter than Snow*, 1998)—in relation to traumatic issues of ethnic cleansing, murder, deportation, and rape? Or, as bearers of the gaze, have they just remained victims?

This position has been explored in the video installation *XY ungelöst* (1997) by another Serbian women artist, Milica Tomić. By making herself the central witness in a reconstruction of a crime committed by Serbian police forces in Kosovo back in 1989, Tomić has invested herself with an inquisitive gaze which seeks the public exposure of repressed content. Her analyses’ resistance—exceeded in her reconstruction by compelling otherwise unwilling members of the Belgrade art community to stand in for murdered Albanians—is not some limit to be transgressed but a mask of repression to be unveiled. This work opens a new chapter on the body and ideology in the place we live, not just relating to accumulated images of massacred bodies, but reaching behind them to grasp the collective ideological body of a nation, the *Volksgemeinschaft*, materialized in individual rituals and collective courses of action.<sup>22</sup>

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22 — For a consideration of art and ideology in Serbia in the period preceding the Kosovo war, see Branislava Andjelković and Branislav Dimitrijević, “Ubištvo ili srećni ljudi/-Murder or Happy People,” in *Druga godišnja izložba Centra za savremenu umetnost / 2nd Annual Exhibition of the Centre for Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Belgrade: Fund for an Open Society and Centre for Contemporary Art, 1998), pp. 12–59.

21 — Oleg Kulik, “Ujedati ili lizati” (“To Lick or to Bite”), 3+4 (Belgrade), no. 4 (Winter 1998), p. 39.

## Ewa Partum, or Feminism That Is Yet to Come

EWA MAJEWSKA

Almost every new aesthetic theory these days announces the end of art and, more recently, the complete commodification of art. However, I have the impression that there are works of art that not only demonstrate the limitations of each of these perspectives, but also generate new ways of experiencing the world, rewriting on this occasion brand-new, multifaceted

grammar rules. *Self-Identification* by Ewa Partum—a series of black-and-white photographs taken and presented for the first time in 1980—certainly ranks among such works. As I will try to demonstrate herein, it heralds the feminism which is yet to come. It is also a valuable contribution to the discussion on the methodology and periodization of artistic

output; geopolitics, art, and the public sphere; and, last but not least, the theory of the avant-garde. In this text I shall therefore prove not only art's autonomy and agency, but also the limitations of the theories attempting to define it. It is possible that I shall manage also to confirm the criticism of using liberal feminism in art research, especially that created by women, formulated by Griselda Pollock.<sup>1</sup>

Pollock criticised Linda Nochlin, a well-known figure in Poland, for not going beyond the demand for greater participation of women in the androcentric culture,<sup>2</sup> although she did manage to accurately undermine the hegemonic principles of historical art discourse according to which allegedly "there have been no great women artists." The author of *Vision and Difference* demanded the transformation of society as a whole so that various forms of socialization, different ways of experiencing the world, different people, not just those brought up to take up roles and uphold values traditionally perceived as male, could feel fulfilled in this world.

This text is an attempt at a socio-feminist interpretation of Ewa Partum's works. This task is somewhat complicated by the artist's creative activity, which has not only produced important works of art that force us to take a fresh look at society and aesthetic theory, but also by the artist herself, who has been very active in the arts for many years. I suggest, therefore, that *Self-Identification* be treated here as a major and crucial work of art, while Partum's other works be analysed less deeply. I would like to demonstrate in this article how the arts sometime anticipate social developments and theoretical solutions; how the voice of the avant-garde, powerful thus far, has changed into the voice articulated by the weak, the downtrodden, and the excluded; and how our notion of the public sphere has been subject to renegotiation through art, and in particular, through feminist art. I am also interested in how feminist theory, and particularly feminist aesthetics, lag behind topics which are politically important, even if those topics epitomise women's perspectives, problems, or emancipation.

Some art critics seem to think that feminist theory already existed in a developed form when Ewa Partum was shifting towards women's issues and feminism, i.e., in the early 1970s.

This is a theory which I shall try to debunk, as it ignores both the theory and the history of feminist art research; it also makes the title of "feminist" artists conditional upon whether those women artists use this theory or not. In my opinion, this view is harmful for two reasons. Firstly, it introduces an unauthorised determinism which subordinates the potential feminist significance of the work of art to theoretical resources, to which Partum explicitly refers. Secondly, it assumes the existence of feminist theories much earlier than they actually appeared. Until the 1980s, we can talk merely about manifestos; complex, systemised feminist stances in the areas of aesthetics, philosophy, sociology, or economics appeared much later. Piotr Piotrowski wrote in his book entitled *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* that neither Ewa Partum's or Natalia LL's art can be considered *feminist*, because their art was not immersed in feminist discourse; I read Piotr Piotrowski's stance on this issue as an epitomisation of this ahistorical superstition. Piotrowski puts it bluntly: "But this art was not always accompanied by ideological and political declarations incorporated into feminist theory and politics" (*"Ale sztuce tej nie zawsze towarzyszyły ideologiczne i polityczne deklaracje wpisane w feministyczną teorię i politykę"*).<sup>3</sup>

In my opinion, it is difficult to be incorporated into something which, for all intents and purposes, does not exist yet, but whose snippets appear of course as manifestos or essays (often excellent, as a matter of fact, as evidenced by publications by Hélène Cixous, Kate Millet, Juliet Mitchell, or Luce Irigaray), though the "theory" will have been formed some ten years later ... Of course, Piotrowski's merit for restoring Eastern European art's status and popularising art in the international arena, as well as for promoting feminism and queer art and theory, both at home and abroad, cannot be overestimated. We should, however, start a debate on whether the assumptions on which the author has based his conclusions should not be modified.

[...]

I shall endeavour to demonstrate herein that public art, as well as the public or counter-public sphere, has always been the result of dissension, discord, and criticism of state institutions by cultural players (both male and female). The implementation of democracy could even mean the end of public art, at least

1 — Cf. G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, Routledge 1988, p. 35.

2 — L. Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," trans. B. Limanowska, *Ośka* 1999, No. 3 (8).

3 — P. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, University of Chicago Press 2012, p. 247.

in the sense proposed by Shannon Jackson, Chantal Mouffe, or Rosalyn Deutsche.<sup>4</sup>

I have the impression that in many art theories, the correlations between social revolutions and the avant-garde constitute an important confirmation of the need of synthetic and holistic recognition of the social. In Jacques Rancière's theory, politics and art together mould society, and none of these areas is reducible to the latter.<sup>5</sup> Art preserves some degree of autonomy in this respect, like politics; the combination of those two phenomena is interesting when there is no direct transfer of politics into the realm of art or art into the domain of politics, yet when both art and politics reveal a conflict where it seemed to have been solved or which has never existed. In the book entitled *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière collates Josephine Mackseper's works and artistic strategies, and specifically her photograph *Untitled*, with Martha Rosler's series of photographs *Bringing the War Home*.<sup>6</sup> The work of art, in which accidentally scattered garbage was in the foreground while people who were the main focus of the photographer were in the background (demonstrators protesting against the war)—this work was contrasted with another one, in which each element has been chosen consciously—according to what Rancière calls "critical strategy," describing it as perhaps weaker than the one referring to the less literal actions.<sup>7</sup> What seems interesting is that a number of Partum's works, especially *Self-Identification*, oppose the division proposed by Rancière, thereby suggesting that it is entirely possible to link the critical strategy to the openness to randomness, to the unexpected intrusion of everyday life, and to the unveiling of the conflict using strictly formal tools, such as the change of perspective. In the statement accompanying *Self-Identification*, Partum explained that she selected the individual case—herself—in order to talk about women in general, but she did not exhaust the topic in any way.<sup>8</sup> The

reception of this work has always been closely related to Partum's image; we shall not find the analysis of what she showed—besides her own body—in the photographs. Meanwhile, according to Rancière, "emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting..."<sup>9</sup> I would like to suggest here that the possibility of emancipation in contact with art is, however, largely determined by what a female artist initially proposes. In the case of Partum's works—unvaryingly multicontextual but also, as I shall try to emphasise hereafter, consistent, so to speak, with the spirit of the times and reflecting them—this is probably a common situation.

My argument is very simple: the photographs in the *Self-Identification* cycle present much more than just the artist's naked body. It is not the body itself, after all, that makes us go from viewing to acting (which otherwise would constitute a definition of pornography, not emancipation). In the case of Partum's photographs, we can see something more—social life in a Polish city in 1980, with its greyness, boredom, and fatigue. Let us go back in time. It is January 1980. In concrete homes, there is no free love; the natural-born and half-hearted proletarians are queuing up for greyness and exhaustion in their spare time, while critical opinions about the authorities ruling the socialists' paradise are being expressed almost exclusively "in a loud whisper at dinner." The artist, who has been exploring the issues of femininity, incarnation, and the strategies of expressing them in art for several years, makes an attempt, typical for the second wave of feminism, at intervention in the area of the social. The intervention which was, to some extent, scandalous—collages and performances based on nudity still shock in prudish, Catholic Poland. The renegotiation of what is commonly shared, undertaken by Ewa Partum, does not concern solely women. Similar to socialist feminists and Marxists, Partum speaks up for women, but also for society as a whole and for the need for systemic changes. The photographs that made up the discussed series present Warsaw's grey streets, queues for taxis, buses, and shops, melancholic crowds, as though lethargic, buildings of state institutions, and city life like the one

4 — Cf. P. Piotrowski, *Agorafilia: Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, Poznań 2010; idem., *Art and Democracy ...*; C. Mouffe, "Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?," in: *Cork Caucus: On Art, Possibility and Democracy*, ed. T. Byrne, Dublin 2006; R. Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy," *Social Text* 1992, no. 33, pp. 34–53.

5 — J. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. J. Kutyla, P. Mościcki, Warsaw 2006.

6 — J. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London 2014.

7 — Ibid., pp. 26–27.

8 — The most diligent elaboration of Partum's works, their documentation and chronology, can be found in the monograph about the artist entitled *Ewa Partum*, ed. A. Szyłak et al., Gdańsk 2013.

9 — Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 13. I am quoting a longer passage: "Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection [...] The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar."



Ewa Partum. *Autobiography (Autobiografia)*. 1971–74. Ink on cotton, 35¼ × 185½" (89.5 × 471.2 cm).  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Rendl Endowment for Slavic Art

in Thomas Hobbes's state of nature: "lonely, sunless and short-lived."<sup>10</sup> It was only in August 1980 that suddenly the "Solidarity" movement appeared; in the meantime, party dignitaries could sleep peacefully and wake up glad that the proletarians of all countries had no intention to unite, after all. So far, everything was going well. The *Self-Identification* series was shown for the first time in April 1980. The white, corporeal, comely woman's body contrasted in virtually every photo with the grey, weary, and hopeless silhouettes of communist Poland's female and male residents, and only after many years will have been perceived as inseparable. For the time being, art critics focused on the question of whether Ewa Partum was actually pretty.<sup>11</sup> In subsequent years, Partum's work sank into oblivion; only feminist authors and curators recognised its true importance, and only in the context of feminism understood narrowly—as a discussion about women's issues, rather than matters of the society understood as a whole.

Later on, art historians showed some interest in those topics—for two reasons. Firstly, to say that since before 1989 there was no democracy, there was no public art either; secondly, to recognise that if the work of art was not immersed in a global feminist theory, then, basically, it was not a feminist work of art, and besides that feminism came from the West and had no place in the Eastern Bloc before 1989. Ewa Partum's *Self-Identification*, just like all her artistic work, should be, in my view, read and interpreted as part of a broader historical and cultural context. Partum's actions, often performed in public and scandalous, can be simply incomprehensible if we do not know with which elements of modernity they do in fact reverberate. It does not mean that Ewa Partum is a somehow idiosyncratic or local artist. Rather, her works of art have this valuable feature; they often constitute very successful attempts at universalization: starting from strictly particularistic experiences—marriage, aging, domestic violence, recognizing oneself as a woman in a number of cultural mediations—they formulate community's problems, and constitute—as Judith Butler calls it in *Antigone's Claim*—a kind of "claim," with which a woman goes out to the general public, breaking by this gesture

the rules of gender separation, and thus going beyond the private sphere and one's intimate, individual experience. Partum's works of art do not stop at a declaration of individuality—they almost always declare it as if shaped through the rituals of oppression, by which they constitute a sort of expression of the margin, the announcement of what is important for feminist epistemology, especially in Black feminism. In *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks points out that the experience of exclusion allows a different, critical approach to the usually celebrated hegemonic position. The margin concept made *operaism* in Italy strong and popular; Paolo Virno wrote about the "multitude" as a homeless margin, forced to change history.<sup>12</sup> All of that is also conspicuous in Partum's works, and gives them an important dimension of "modernity"—the interplay of the historical moment, of the course of social experience.

Ewa Partum often emphasises that she is an avant-garde artist. She is looking for new tools of expression, new definitions of art, a new understanding of what is private and what is public. Her own arts education should suggest that if art cultivated by Partum is avant-garde, then it is in a classic—romantic, strong, and "masculine"—way. Her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, then also in Łódź, following a programme devised by Władysław Strzemiński, among others, would seem to confirm the above. Nonetheless, already during her studies, Partum rebelled against the form that was generally accepted back then (and which has been very often adopted) by artistic higher education institutions. Her legendary master's thesis, *emballage* on two *assemblages* by Tadeusz Kantor, presented as her own work, without the committee's protest, with an extensive theoretical commentary which presented a devastating critique of "copyism," a dominant practice at the Academy of Fine Arts (the duty of painting Cybis-style paintings or mounting Kantor-style art installations), has become, in my opinion, an inherent part of the entire remix culture, which was, in the 1960s, yet to come. Partum's reluctance fits squarely into a maxim, common in feminist circles today, coined by Emma Goldman, an American-Jewish Russian-born anarchist, who once said: "If I cannot dance to it, it's not my revolution." Women artists and curators repeating this watchword are today in many cases serious and level-headed ladies in

10 — Cf. T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, trans. C. Niemirowski, Warsaw 1954, p. 338

11 — This very interesting issue has been analysed by journalists from magazines such as *Polityka*, which has been documented in the aforementioned monograph of the artist and in the exhibition, as well as on different television and radio programmes.

12 — P. Virno, *The Grammar of the Multitude*, Massachusetts 2004.

well-paid jobs or heiresses to large fortunes or well-provided-for celebrities. But Ewa Partum, who presented at her final exam another artist's works of art bearing a crushing title for her art school, actually risked a lot.

If we take a closer look at Partum's graduation work from the perspective of the theory and history of the avant-garde, the phrasing that arose in the context of the postmodern turn proves to be much more appropriate, rather than the expressions which are anachronistic from today's perspective, and which have functioned—for much of the twentieth century—as classics. Thinking about the avant-garde artist only as someone who is uncompromising in building his/her activities, bearing full responsibility and in all seriousness characteristic of the romantic "changing the world's foundation," must be softened or even broken in a confrontation with Partum's graduation work. The artist does not reject the school, nor contest the teacher-student relationship, as did her peers at the Sorbonne. Either she is not an avant-garde artist, or the definition of avant-garde has changed through her activities. I would suggest taking a closer look at the second option. As Hal Foster has rightly pointed out in his article entitled "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?," the contemporary avant-garde focuses more on the transfer of meaning, even on failed indications, rather than on building everlasting novelty.<sup>13</sup> Partum could not foresee all the repercussions of her actions, which included the moment of astonishment and surprise, not only foreseen but also envisioned, as well as the risk and possibility of failure. I would like to emphasise here that hesitating while building the meaning and the risk of failure allows us to speak not only about the postmodern avant-garde, which challenged its own foundations, but also about the "weak" avant-garde, which—in analogy to the recovery by queer theorists of their good name—questions strength and masculinity as attributes of politically causative art.

In a text published recently as a chapter of an extensive monograph on Ewa Partum, Andrzej Turowski wrote about "feminist conceptualism," suggesting that it is worth highlighting the originality and uniqueness of the actions taken by the artist by coining a separate concept.<sup>14</sup> Turowski emphasises that Partum

"demands the impossible," as each avant-garde does, and applies to her activities rather traditional avant-garde criteria, characteristic of what Peter Bürger understood under that term rather than what Hal Foster described under his deconstructivist impulse. For me, Partum's artistic output has too many elements characteristic of pastiche, irony, even buffoonery to maintain the classical concept of the avant-garde in force. Partum's art too easily bridges the gap between the conventional notions characteristic of the artistic formation, i.e., the avant-garde, which derived its name from the military domain. Partum acts more like someone for whom it is important to reveal the sheer force as a mechanism which is harmful and already useless. In this sense she is closer to feminists and queer people like Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, and Jack Halberstam who are contesting—each of them in a different way—the heterosexual matrix as a subject's byproduct of fear (socialised as male sexual anxiety) of what is "different."<sup>15</sup> The phenomenal text devoted to Carol Gilligan's dispute with Lawrence Kohlberg Benhabib outlined a brilliant network of connections between the socialisation to the male gender role, the need for fencing off and separating one's property and one's "self" from what is different and from the deeply rooted fear of intermingling and of otherness. Ewa Partum—as the author of happenings, during which she acts like a classic party "idiot" (*Stupid Woman*) or, when naked, she performs a series of spins on a mirror (*Pirouette*)—has rather no fear; she has nothing to lose and can therefore create her art. She can also build her life and make political decisions focused not so much on where the "ego" boundaries start and end but rather on where those boundaries are difficult to recognise, and thus become not only fascinating, but also more marked by the social odium. In each of these works, Partum refers to failure and exposes herself to it, exploring it in depth. This is definitely not an avant-garde activity in the classical sense of the word, but rather reminiscent of Jack J. Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure*. The works of art and popular culture which highlight stupidity and incompetence have been identified as conducive to the construction of alternatives to the hegemonic androcentric representation of

13 — H. Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?," *October* no. 70, Fall 1994, pp. 5–32.

14 — A. Turowski, "The Greatness of Desire: On the Feminist Conceptualism of Ewa Partum in the 1970s," in *Ewa Partum*, op. cit.

15 — S. Benhabib, "The Generalised and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory," in: S. Benhabib and D. Cornell, *Feminism as Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late-Capitalist Society*, London 1987; J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, trans. K. Krasuska, Warsaw 2008; J. J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham 2010.



the subject. Halberstam stresses the need to combine the criticism of heteronormativity and sexism with the criticism of the neoliberal fixation on productivity and efficiency, which makes us ask about the utopian or subversive nature of the failure.<sup>16</sup> From Halberstam's perspective, resistance definitely does not need to be the work of force.

The notion of a "weak avant-garde" that I would like to put forth seems to me a little bit more inclusive than the concept of "feminist conceptualism," proposed before by Turowski and applicable almost exclusively to women. It constitutes a contradiction in the definition, as well as a reversal of the manner in which the avant-garde has been perceived and practiced before. The "weak avant-garde" is what is ordinary and what Kafka described so beautifully in his story of a singing mouse, "Josephine," and what Gerald Raunig<sup>17</sup> followed up with in *Factories of Knowledge*. We are unnecessarily accustomed (both men and women) to the notion of women artists, feminists, and, generally speaking, politically causative subjects. The notion of "weak avant-garde" emphasises uniqueness, strength, and bravery, instead of showing that which is defined by the revolutionary agency of the socially excluded, who Walter Benjamin stated will bring "weak messianism,"<sup>18</sup> while Paolo Virno and other operaists claimed that they are a homeless and unrooted multiplicity which implements—in spite of this or, perhaps, because of it—transversal principles of the general intellect, thus transforming reality.<sup>19</sup> Ewa Partum's art and especially her performative and photographic works are an artistic expression, particularly in the performance entitled *Perla* (Pearl) from 2006, in which the artist encourages ordinary, poor women from South America, working as domestic servants in Spanish artsy-bohemian houses, to take part in creating the Spanish national flag with a simple gesture that does not require any special talents—imprinting their red-coloured lips on a piece of fabric.

The work entitled *My Touch Is a Touch of a Woman* and the work *Hommage à Solidarność* ensuing from this conclusion and the

consequent practice, performed after the introduction of martial law in Poland, and later on performed in Germany, where Partum emigrated in 1983, constitutes the artist's response to bare state violence, which thwarts all the efforts aimed by the oppressed masses at the establishment of democracy. As in the history of the formation of the bourgeois public sphere where—as evidenced, e.g., by Jurgen Habermas—progressive social groups became active against the authorities, and not thanks to them, the most pertinent, inclusive, and emancipatory moments in Partum's works were those focused on institutional violence. A naked woman gazing at the face of a policewoman in probably the most famous photo from the *Self-Identification* series anticipates Rancière's theory of resistance, in which the rigid rules of interpellation, described by Louis Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, become broken by an insolent glance given to the authorities by an individual who says "no" while not standing out from the crowd and while maintaining their ordinariness, fragility, and vulnerability.<sup>20</sup> In Althusser's classical model of interpellation, the representatives of the ideological state apparatuses call the subject to be identified by hailing "Hey, you there!" Not only does it bring an individual back to life, but also establishes, strengthens, and stabilises such an individual in a submissive position, by which the subject obediently accepts the imposed form, confirming the relation of power with an "Amen!" In *Self-Identification*, on the other hand, just as in Rancière's *Nights of Labour* or in Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, the subject looks at the state authorities in a way that does not bode well for its structures.<sup>21</sup> We can give patriarchal authority the same critical look. This will be nonviolent, just the announcement of a feminism that is coming, in which it is not the elites but the social masses who will respond to the perpetrators of subjugation.

Excerpted from ewa partum: *nic nie zatrzyma idei sztuki/ nothing stops the idea of art*. Edited by Maria Morzuch. Translated by Monika Fryszkowska. Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 2015.

16 — Ibid.

17 — Cf. G. Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge. Industries of Creativity*, Massachusetts 2013.

18 — W. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in: *Angel of History: Essays, Sketches, and Fragments*, trans. W. Orlowski, Poznań 1996.

19 — Cf. P. Virno, op. cit.

20 — Cf. L. Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*, trans. A. Staroń.

21 — Cf. J. Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. J. Drury, Philadelphia 1989; J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, trans. A. Ostolski, Warsaw 2008.

# The Question of Female Guilt in Sanja Iveković's Art: From Yugoslav Beauty Pageants to Wartime Witch Hunts

IVANA BAGO

"Women guilty of feeling too guilty," a recent newspaper article stated, humorously summarising the results of research that established a preponderance of guilty feelings in women compared to men.<sup>1</sup> [ . . . ] An ambivalent term, guilt implies both an objective verdict of culpability according to a specific law or value system and the subjective experience of interiorising such culpability, in which case it is equivalent to remorse.<sup>2</sup> Although these two sides of the coin can never be fully separated, I am not interested here in psychological aspects of the internalisation of guilt, but primarily in the social mechanisms of its imposition.

I therefore define female guilt as the product of a series of socially, culturally and historically determined processes by which women are made objects of ideological and systemic culpability—by which they are, in other words, interpellated as guilty social subjects—in ways that are inseparable from patriarchal and misogynous constructions of femininity and female sexuality. The history of female guilt is coextensive with that of misogyny, as the "hatred," oppression and persecution of women have typically been accompanied and justified by discourses about women's inherent potential to undermine a given social order.<sup>3</sup> However,

foregrounding how guilt is imposed upon—and internalised by—women allows us to see how it is reproduced, consciously or otherwise, in mutated forms even when social, legal and discursive frameworks of misogyny and oppression are largely absent. It enables us, furthermore, to see how guilt operates even within feminist discourses and struggles against this oppression.

[ . . . ]

The imposition of guilt is most evident in moments of social crisis when the fragility of the existing order tentatively resurfaces, and when the origins and implications of a crisis are not fully grasped but are obscured and displaced onto a construed "woman problem." In these circumstances, a certain kind of "woman" or "female behaviour" becomes a sign, a bearer, if not the very cause of crisis.<sup>4</sup> In Sanja Iveković's *Documents 1949–1976* exhibition, images of women from the popular press, mostly fashion models and celebrities, represented one such sign. The "crises" and "fragilities" it pointed to can be read from three different perspectives: that of the art world, of feminist art theory and of Yugoslav socialism.

Within the boundaries of the art world, these images signified the waning of the ruling aesthetic regime of male-dominated modernist abstraction. The disembodied white-cube purity of the house of art was contaminated with the effeminate kitsch culture of mass media, and the genderless, but implicitly male, artist was replaced by one who asserted her gendered female subjectivity.

[ . . . ]

While the [local participants at the first feminist conference organised in Yugoslavia in 1978] were struck by seeing [guest participants]

1 — Brian Alexander, "Women Guilty of Feeling Too Guilty, Study Shows," NBC News, 11 March 2010, [www.nbcnews.com/id/35788411/#.UmQTFpTEpDE](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/35788411/#.UmQTFpTEpDE).

2 — The present discussion cannot nearly address the complexities entailed in the notion of guilt. Is guilt an objective or subjective, demonstrable or imaginary, individual or collective verdict of culpability, and according to the authority of which, or whose, law? Does law institute guilt, or is there guilt without, or prior to, law, a guilt which institutes law? Can there be guilt without culpability, an innocent guilt, and how to account for the phenomenon of the guilt of the victim or "survivor's guilt"? These are only some of the demanding questions that seek to be, and have been, addressed from multiple perspectives of philosophy, law, psychoanalysis, critical theory, political science, etc.

3 — The mythical account of original sin and the resulting loss of paradise, shared by all three major monotheistic religions, is probably one of the core narratives in Western culture, where it has perpetuated disastrous consequences for women's lives, ranging from the challenges of their daily existence to massive historical catastrophes, such as the witch hunts in Europe which "exposed" the female alliance with the devil. For a historical account of misogyny, primarily in Western culture, see Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice*, Robinson Publishing, London, 2006. With similarly grave or more

"benign" repercussions, original sin and other mythical narratives have been replicated throughout history in cultural constructions of the fatal consequences of female beauty and sexuality. See, for example, *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010.

4 — This is of course the logic of every process of creating external and internal enemies to be blamed and persecuted, which in Europe today is most notably the case with the Roma population and immigrants.

sitting on the floor, “without bras,” some guests expressed the view that the locals were insufficiently oppositional to male culture, were “not critical enough of male models of female beauty, [and were] in some way *corrupted* by male culture.”<sup>5</sup> The response of visitors resonated with the more general allegation made by Western feminists at the conference that Yugoslavs were not radical enough in their claims, and that they resorted too often to state-sanctioned discourses of Marxism and self-management. From the Yugoslav feminists’ perspective, the Westerners neither fully understood the radical character of staging a feminist conference in Yugoslavia, nor the fact that women in socialist Yugoslavia had numerous rights that many Western women were still fighting for, including equality in work and divorce, and access to abortion.

What Western feminists also failed to grasp was the strategy of mimicry employed by Yugoslav feminists, which, in the words of Sofija Trivunac, consisted of devising “covert ways” of “how to do the [feminist] thing but not *call* it feminist.”<sup>6</sup> According to Trivunac, this tactic ultimately made a greater impact than the direct propagation of feminism, which would cause a negative reaction and therefore be counterproductive. According to the same logic, Trivunac tried to look very feminine, in order not to incite allegations that her feminism related to her inability to “catch a man.” She referred to her articles in the popular women’s magazine *Bazaar*, which “came to be considered as feminist, gaining a certain popularity.”<sup>7</sup> Again, we encounter feminism in “disguise,” submerged in the benevolence of a popular women’s magazine that predominantly addressed fashion, travel, and culinary trends.

*Bazaar* was founded in 1964. In the early 1970s, another magazine called *Start* appeared, only this was based on Western men’s magazines such as *Playboy*. *Start* became widely (in)famous for its sexually explicit soft-porn cover and its centrespread featuring female nudity. Ironically, from the late 1970s it became a platform for feminist writing, involving many of the participants of the Belgrade 1978 conference. Author and activist Vesna Kesić, a contributor and later briefly editor of *Start*, stated that its covers were “widely understood to represent a

form of ‘sexual liberation.’” Although she admitted that this was certainly a “distorted notion of women’s freedom,” in her view the magazine opposed the prevailing socialist ideals of self-sacrifice and moral purity of women.<sup>8</sup> *Start* was the first magazine in Yugoslavia to welcome feminist themes and to feature articles by feminist writers such as Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem, who “fought pornography from the inside”<sup>9</sup>—another strategy of mimicry that was mirrored in the stance of Yugoslav feminists in *Start*. The magazine was liberal, “anti-Communist” and “Western-oriented” but “tolerated.” Similarly, Kesić states that Yugoslav feminists were perceived as complicit with the capitalist West and “importing decadent bourgeois ideology,” which was also how the official Yugoslav women’s organisations saw the Belgrade conference.<sup>10</sup> As in Nikša Fulgosi’s film about beauty pageants, here too a certain kind of woman, in this case a feminist, was seen to embody the betrayal of society’s core values, surrendering themselves freely to the enemy army.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Iveković does not directly refer to these historical occurrences in the *Documents* 1949–1976 works, some of which predate those events, all of the works in her exhibition echo this wider social and political context. While her works do not narrate these histories, they enable us to articulate them from the vantage point of the present by revealing the sign of the female body as a site in which all those histories converge: from the crisis of art to the purported triumph of capitalism and the collapse of socialism, to dissent amongst feminists, the gaps between nominal and lived equality, and East-West (mis)translations. There are no “clean” positions in these agonistic narratives, and all participants

8 — Vesna Kesić, “Response to Catherine MacKinnon’s Article ‘Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide,’” *Hastings Women’s Law Journal* 5, 1994, p. 272.

9 — Ibid., p. 273.

10 — Ibid. The reference to women’s organisations’ view of the Belgrade conference is from Bojana Pejić: it was “greatly attacked by the official Yugoslav women’s organisations, and their criticism was based on their claim that such a feminist stance is superfluous in our society, which ‘overcame’ gender differences already in the Revolution; moreover, the ‘new approach’ was regarded as an ‘import’ from the (capitalist) West.” Pejić, “The Morning After: *Plavi radion, Abstract Art and Bananas*,” originally published in *n.paradoxa* 10, 2002, reprinted in *Gender Check: A Reader—Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ERSTE Foundation (eds.), Walther König, 2010, p. 107.

11 — Interestingly, Piotr Piotrowski analysed the work *Consumer Art* by Polish artist Natalia Lach-Lachowicz in the same terms of capitalist collaboration. Whereas this work, involving a woman in a provocative interaction with a banana, could have been seen as critical if it had been produced in the Western context, in Poland, where there was a lack, rather than excess, of consumer goods, it “acquired a completely new meaning—it became non-critical, it aroused rather than analysed consumerism, it was an act of *surrender* and not description.” Piotr Piotrowski, cited in *ibid.*, p. 106. My emphasis.

5 — Cited in Chiara Bonfiglioli, “Belgrade, 1978 Remembering the Conference ‘Drug-ca Žena: Žensko Pitanje – Novi Pristup? / Comrade Woman: The Women’s Question – A New Approach?’ Thirty Years After,” *Master’s thesis*, Utrecht University, 2008, p. 85. My emphasis.

6 — Sofija Trivunac, cited in *ibid.*, p. 88. Original emphasis.

7 — Ibid.

and sides are implicated in a net of mutual allegations. In the subsequent work *Triangle* (1979), Iveković performs these entangled relations, which intersect at the site of the female body. Sitting on a balcony, masturbating, drinking whisky and reading Marxist literature while President Tito's parade proceeds below, Iveković performs a disturbance of and dissent against immediate regulations. Her act violates the gendered borders regulating pleasure and its public display, enacting tensions between the law and its transgression, between the masculine authority of the state and the keepers of the law, the cheering masses, the waving flags and herself.<sup>12</sup> She willfully assumes the position of a guilty female subject (who disobeys the law), yet the act of disobedience is performed with pleasure, so that guilt remains nominal, not internalised.

Tracing "female guilt" even via a small number of cultural, social and artistic references shows their striking interconnectedness, revealing that they cannot be tamed and perceived as frozen objects in the past but have strong reverberations in the recent past and the present. Kesić's discussion of *Start* cited earlier was provoked by another instance of feminist West-East misreading, twenty-five years after the Belgrade conference, now in the context of the wars that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Writing about the mass rapes of women during the war, American feminist Catherine MacKinnon foregrounded links between pornography and war rapes, at the same time diachronically tracing a continuity of pornography in Yugoslavia, naming *Start* magazine as the prime support of her thesis.<sup>13</sup> To the already prevalent pathologisation of the post-Yugoslav wars in the West as a symptom of the fatal Balkan cocktail of "blood and honey," MacKinnon added pornography, marking Yugoslavia as an especially ominous case where the scopophilic violence of pornographic representations was directly materialised into disastrous social reality. Kesić's response, in which she warned of factual errors and inconsistencies in MacKinnon's position as well its potential reverberations with nationalist discourses perpetuating war, was written at a time when she found herself once again facing misogynous impositions of female guilt. As before, the sign of the female body linked past and present, as

*Start* magazine was seen to represent a link between two histories of denunciation. As she wrote: "The feminists at *Start* were, in fact, accused of 'importing decadent bourgeois ideology' and publicly attacked, just as today we are called 'witches' and national traitors, for not being 'patriotic enough' and nationalistic enough in our understanding of the deep roots of war and war rapes."<sup>14</sup> Kesić referred to the infamous "Witches of Rio" case of late 1992, when the weekly *Globus* denounced five women (all associated with Yugoslav feminism of the previous decades) for spreading lies about Croatia in the international press. According to *Globus*, the women not only almost prevented an international literary congress taking place in Croatia, they negated the suffering of victims of war rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina by talking about the "rape of women" in the war in general, and not the rape of Muslim and Croatian women by the Serbian fascist aggressor. The article's title appropriately summarised its malicious charges: "Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia!"<sup>15</sup> The text, and the ensuing spread of paranoia that it promoted, amounted to persecution that stooped to the lowest forms of personal defamation. It analysed the women's ethnic backgrounds, their appearance, and their marriages, noting how many were married to Serbs as evidence of their long-performed "surrender" to the Serbian enemy, which made "logical" their current betrayal of the Croatian nation.

Iveković's artistic and activist path is interwoven with that of the "witches from Rio," from her involvement in feminist discussion groups in the late 1970s and 1980s to her engagement in feminist and antiwar activism in the framework of civil society organisations in post-1991 Croatia. From the 1990s on, Iveković made a series of works involving a network of women's groups, participating in public campaigns warning about violence against women, and making artistic projects that entailed the participation of survivors of violence and activists who ran women's shelters (most notably, a long-term project *Women's House*, 1998–).<sup>16</sup> Her works such as *Gen XX* (1997–2001), *Lost and Found* (2003) and *SOS Nada Dimić* (2000) were early examples

14 — Kesić, p. 273.

15 — The five feminists were Slavenka Drakulić, Rada Iveković, Vesna Kesić, Jelena Lovrić, and Dubravka Ugrešić. See the account and documentation of the case at: <http://women-war-memory.org/index.php/en/povijest/vjestice-iz-ria>. Rio refers to Rio de Janeiro, where the PEN meeting was held, at which the women allegedly sabotaged Croatia's hosting of PEN's event, when they were not even present in Rio.

12 — See a close analysis of *Triangle* in Antonia Majača, "Disentangled, Exposed, Triangulated," in *Unknown Heroine*, exhibition catalogue, Lina Džuverović (ed.), Calvert 22, London, 2013, pp. 24–34.

13 — Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide," *Ms* 4.1, 1993, pp. 24–30.

16 — See Katy Deepwell, "Sanja Iveković's Women's Room/ Frauenhaus Project," *Afterall* 15, 2007, pp. 83–88.

of resisting the nationalist obliteration of the socialist past that took place on both the symbolic and economic levels, as in the case of *SOS Nada Dimić/Nada Dimić File* (2000–), which traced the privatisation of a socialist factory named after a female anti-fascist heroine that had been renamed Endy International in the process.

[...]

Yet Iveković has not limited the rejection of nationalist and patriarchal discourses to her own country. Her famous work *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg* caused a stir in Luxembourg in 2001 when she became the centre of fierce public discussions in which she was accused of blaspheming local history and memory. For this piece, Iveković had reproduced the “Golden Lady” monument commemorating Luxembourgian soldiers who fought in World War I. One of the three alterations Iveković made to the original sculpture was to render the female allegory as a pregnant woman, thereby breaking the safe neutrality of the idealised and disembodied allegory. In an analysis of this work, Bojana Pejić revealingly points to another potential implication of the sign of pregnancy, when read in the context of war (which the monument commemorated)—the rape of women as part of the violent machinery of war, and the nonexistence of public memorials to this suffering.<sup>17</sup> Construed as both symbol and property of the nation, women raped by the enemy cannot be seen as signs of heroism, but primarily become a sign of male humiliation and shame. Even as victims, they are ultimately guilty of embodying defeat and violation by the enemy.

[...]

Iveković’s work enables us to trace the histories of “female guilt” and their reverberations in the present. Her 2013 project focuses on the central trope of female guilt, the witch. The project *Isn’t she too old for this? (On witches)* was instigated by a reading of Silvia Federici’s book *Caliban and the Witch*.<sup>18</sup> In the book, Federici warns against ignoring the crucial relevance of the witch hunts in early modern Europe, which are absent in classical Marxist accounts of the primitive accumulation of capital.<sup>19</sup> The historical collusion between gender violence, colonialism and capitalism in Federici’s book

makes it possible to trace its present-day repercussions in a world dominated by capitalist oppression. Iveković’s project thus asks who are the “witches” of today, posing the question of both the multiplicities of global modes of oppression as well as resistances to them, and how these acts of resistance can reconnect with earlier subjugated knowledges and protests. Included in the project’s archive of images and texts is a collection of newspaper and internet clippings documenting the “Witches of Rio” case. The majority of younger local audiences are likely to know nothing about this case, which Iveković’s work reconnects to and reactivates, along with other histories of oppression and persecution.

While the history of the witch hunt is the history of female guilt, Iveković’s work enables us to trace its oppositional narrative—the history of the witch, or the history of rejecting the imposition of guilt. Rejecting guilt has nothing to do with ethical and political relativism. Rather, it rejects the obfuscation of real social relations of power and oppression that impose guilt in an attempt to hide and displace the actual collusions that are the source of oppression. Even though today, after witnessing two decades of the social and economic catastrophe of “capitalist transition” in ex-Yugoslavia, we may empathise with the maker of *100 Beauties a Day*, who in 1971 saw the disaster of capitalist triumph approaching, the key point is to recognise that the “beauties” had nothing to do with the real origins of that disaster. Those origins lie in the colonial, capitalist, racist, nationalist and patriarchal logic of global dominance, reproduced and perfected over centuries by dominant world nations, which the “Yugoslav experiment” of workers’ self-management in a multinational state—including numerous other local and international projects of resistance, of smaller or greater scale—ultimately could not withstand.<sup>20</sup> To acknowledge as much does not mean that we should not reexamine and reactivate the history of the Yugoslav project, as well as other histories of resistance, in order to continue “experimenting.”

Excerpted from *Unknown Heroine: A Reader*. Edited by Lina Džuverović and Helena Reckitt. Translated by Vesna Džuverović. London: Calvert 22 Foundation, 2013.

17 — Bojana Pejić, “Monument, Memory and Feminist Scepticism,” in *Sanja Iveković. Lady Rosa of Luxembourg*, Musée d’Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, MUDAM Luxembourg Casino Luxembourg–Forum d’art contemporain, Luxembourg, 2012.

18 — At the exhibition *Extravagant Bodies: Extravagant Minds*, curated by KONTEJNER, dealing with issues of old age.

19 — Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, NY, 2004.

20 — The reference is to the study of Yugoslavia from the 1970s: Dennon I. Rusinow, *The Yugoslav Experiment, 1948–1974*, published for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, by the University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977. By the above I certainly don’t mean to posit the leadership of the disintegrated state, especially in its final phase, as passive victims, but rather as complicit with internalising this logic.

# 7

*Le fric,  
c'est pas  
si chic,  
dit le  
Tajik.*

**What's  
the Plan,  
Uzbekistan?  
I'm your  
man,  
Azerbaijan!**

**das  
kapital  
will**

Men  
are from  
Murmansk

Women  
are from  
Vilnius

Nice tan,  
Turkmeni-  
stan!

FROM  
LVOV  
  
WITH  
LVOVE



7

**In a Global  
World**

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# Introduction

BORIS GROYS

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**It is not an easy task to speak about the contemporary art of Eastern Europe in its entirety.** The countries of the former Eastern bloc are heterogeneous, and they have very different cultural and artistic traditions. This heterogeneity became especially obvious after each started to develop its own statehood. Still, there are some similarities in the development of art in these countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Partially, these similarities are produced by the socialist experience that these countries shared. Of course, one can argue that, as time goes on, this common experience becomes more and more a thing of the past. And that is, of course, true. There is, however, also a second layer of common experience that defined the cultural situation in postcommunist countries in an even more radical way than their common socialist past.

All the postsocialist countries entered the international cultural and, specifically, art scene at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, as this scene was becoming almost completely dominated by identity politics. The universalist utopias of the 1960s and '70s were not only forgotten but also ideologically rejected: they seemed to be too Western, too Eurocentric, too masculine. The 1980s and '90s were, on the contrary, a time of feminist and postcolonial critiques of universalism. Everybody was obliged to seek their own roots. Everybody had to discover their own tradition. Everyone was postmodernist in the sense that he or she rejected the universalist modernist canon as well as the dominant art institutions based on this canon. At first glance, this return to roots promised an easy acceptance of Eastern European cultures as another set of national-cultural identities under the conditions of postmodern permissiveness. In fact, the situation became more complicated.

Today, from a certain historical distance, the former socialist regimes of Eastern Europe are often characterized as “dictatorships”—comparable with, let’s say, Latin American dictatorships during the same historical period. The Eastern European socialist regimes did not, however, merely censor cultural and artistic practices but also generated them. International socialist culture has its own long tradition going back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and even further, to Plato’s *Republic* and the first Christian communities. The primary goal of socialist cultural policy was to develop this socialist/communist cultural tradition and combine it with the national traditions of the individual socialist countries. Thus, living in a communist country, one still felt the close connection between the artistic practices of the early avant-garde and the beginnings of Soviet communism. For a late-socialist subject, the *Black Square* of Kazimir Malevich was not merely a self-referential image that initiated the international style of geometric abstraction. Rather, in the socialist countries, the *Black Square*, as well as other images of the early Russian avant-garde, signified the beginning of the communist era with all its utopian aspirations. Similarly, traditional realist images functioned not as simple, politically innocent representations of landscapes or city scenes, but symbolized the national tradition that was partially denied, partially ideologically appropriated and reinterpreted by the regime. In other words, every use of the existing vocabulary of images manifested not merely the creative freedom of an individual artist but a certain political stance inside the sociopolitical field in which the artist lived.

As a result, Eastern European cultural identities became combinations of the various national traditions and the international communist tradition. The epoch of historical communism was defined by Stalin's decision to abandon the Leninist pursuit of global communism to focus on building socialism in the Soviet Union. From the beginning it was clear that the socialism-in-one-country program would lead to the rebirth of nationalism—and it did. The socialist camp began to split along national lines: after Soviet communism, one got Yugoslav communism, Chinese communism, Albanian communism, and so on, up through the Eurocommunism of the Italian and French Communist Parties. But this fragmentation did not produce a simple return to the traditional national cultures, understood as specific, even idiosyncratic ways of life. Every particular national communism had a claim to represent the universal and authentic truth of communism, casting the communists of other countries as “revisionists.” Here the analogy is obvious with Christianity, which was also split along national lines during the period of the Reformation and religious wars.

Thus, looking back at their own roots and identities, Eastern European artists found that these identities were mixed or hybrid. This discovery was not, of course, original. In the framework of postcolonial discourse, the topic of mixed, hybrid identity had already been widely debated. But the components of postcolonial hybrid identities were different from the components of Eastern European identities. Postcolonial hybrid identity consisted of non-European national-cultural traditions and European education (English, French, etc.). Thus, postcolonial artists and intellectuals criticized Western dominance and exclusivity, but with the goal of expanding Western cultural institutions to include non-Western traditions and perspectives as well. On the contrary, the goal of the postcommunist Eastern European regimes was the total abolition of communism, and in many cases also the suppression of all forms of communist ideology. Here again we find the strong form of censorship—but this time the censorship was, and still is, directed against the socialist component of postsocialist art and culture. Thus, hybrid Eastern European identities are not to be asserted as such but purified of all their communist remnants to become purely national—and, yes, purely European. This is the basic difference between the postcolonial and postcommunist modes of postmodernism. The core of the standard postcolonial discourse is the struggle against Eurocentricism. The core of the dominating postcommunist discourse is the affirmation of Eurocentricism. Eastern European nations want to become European again, after several decades of separation from Western Europe. The majority of intellectuals and artists of these countries look to their “European,” precommunist past with the goal of finding their cultural roots. In other words, they look to the Europe of the 1930s or even, in the case of some former Soviet republics, the Europe of the end of the nineteenth century—to the time when European states were truly nationalistic and, therefore, from the historical perspective, appear as truly European.

Thus, today, the old line between the West and East reemerges in a different form. The West is not supposed to subtract certain periods of its history from its cultural capital (maybe the only exception here is the German art of the Nazi era). But in the Eastern European countries, communism is largely understood as a mere interruption, interval, or delay in the “normal” development of these countries—a delay which, once it was over, left no traces other than a certain appetite to “make up for lost time” and build capitalism of the Western type. On the right, one speaks about deregulation and the reduction of state bureaucracy. On the left, one protests against state control of public

life. But what are the results of this struggle against the state? The weakening of the modern social state leads also to the subjection of art practices to the rules of the art market. However, open markets are not able to create and sustain such cultural institutions as museums or libraries; this was and today remains a task for nation-states. Of course, one could argue that the internet can be seen as a stateless archive—and that is partially true. But the internet is held in private hands, and thus reflects the cultural identity of the (predominantly American) corporations that own it.

In fact, contemporary globalization is the direct opposite of the modern ideal of internationality, or universality. The world of globalization is not a world of international solidarity or shared cultural values. But neither is globalization a realm of the anonymous “crowd mind,” as it was celebrated by the boosters of postmodernism. Rather, it is the world of global competition, everybody against everybody. This competition pushes the subjects who participate in it to mobilize their own human capital. And human capital, as it was described, for example, by Michel Foucault, is primarily the cultural heritage that is mediated by the family and the milieu in which an individual has grown up. That is why the contemporary logic of globalization, unlike internationalization or universalization of the modernist type, leads to cultural conservatism and the insistence on one’s own cultural identity. The combination of economic globalization and extreme cultural conservatism defines the politics and art of our time.

Now, one could argue that contemporary art in general, and many Eastern European artists in particular, try to compensate for this lack of the universal perspective. To cite only very few examples: in Poland, Artur Żmijewski organizes events and creates spaces in which the global controversies of our time can manifest themselves; the Slovenian art group IRWIN develops a project of the international artistic state; in Russia, the group Chto Delat (What is to be done?) thematizes the heritage of communism in our time, and Arseny Zhilyaev reconstructs the cosmic, universalist vision of the early Russian avant-garde.

Contemporary art is often criticized for being too elitist, not open enough to the broader public. But the contrary is the case: today the art milieus are, as a rule, much more open and inclusive than the national societies inside which these milieus operate. The relatively closed art territories are paradoxically more open to the outside world than to the societies that surround these territories. True contemporary art is a territory that accepts everybody and everything—in the middle of a world that, in our time, is becoming increasingly conservative and restrictive.

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## Summary of Critical Texts

KSENIA NOURIL

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**“Global” is a catchword often overused to describe our contemporary condition.**

Even though international and transnational alliances mark many of today’s social, political, and economic activities, a regional perspective remains critical to the writing of Central and Eastern European histories of art. The texts in this chapter speak not only to how Central and Eastern Europe is represented but also investigate the ongoing

relevance of the region's categorization as such, particularly in light of globalization's homogenizing tendencies.

In an essay originally published by *L'Internationale Online*, the virtual platform for the European Union-funded, multi-institutional project *L'Internationale*, Bojana Piškur finds a promising if imperfect model for transnational resistance in the history of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the network of nation-states primarily in South America, Africa, and Asia, but also including Yugoslavia, that formed in 1961 as a “third way” between the East and West blocs. The NAM directed its multifarious activities against imperialism, colonialism, racism, and other forms of hegemonic domination in order to reconfigure social, political, and economic paradigms and rebalance international dynamics of power. Piškur draws out three case studies—the Ljubljana (International) Biennial of Graphic Arts, the International Committee of Artistic Solidarity with Chile, and the Week of Latin America at the Belgrade Student Cultural Center—that embodied a kind of cooperative collectivism in which she sees potential for those seeking to counter the dominant hegemonic forces of globalization today.

Inke Arns and Andreas Broeckmann consider another form of collectivism—the propagation of narratives via media—in their text. While chronicling the significant role of television in announcing major moments of political upheaval in Central and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and early '90s, they focus particular attention on a range of “minor” media that operated in parallel. Pirate radio stations, samizdat publications, and, later, the internet, provided outlets for alternative and often local perspectives that shaped the same global stories. The text itself, written in 1997, is a product of this phenomenon, as it was circulated via Nettime, an online mailing list that served as an ephemeral locus for Eurocentric intellectual activity well into the early 2000s.

Boris Buden, the artist Luchezar Boyadjiev, and the art collective Slavs and Tatars use the literary devices of allegory, irony, and parody to acerbically assess the impacts of globalization from each writer's local perspective within the broader context of Central and Eastern Europe. In Buden's comical parable, the protagonists try to come to terms with the cyclical nature of history as they attempt to embrace new, postcommunist ideals buoyed by rampant capitalism and neoliberal politics, inviting conflicted reflections on the socialist past. Boyadjiev takes stock of the Bulgarian art scene ten years after the country's integration into the European Union. Now, in light of the gradual disintegration of the European community, how has this alliance affected the visual arts? While independent initiatives thrive, state support is anemic to nonexistent, resulting in imbalances and missed opportunities. In many cases, Bulgarian artists appear to be better off working outside their home country. While Boyadjiev by and large seems to embrace his country's turn to the West, the duo Slavs and Tatars conclude in their manifesto that, instead of hopelessly looking westward, Slavs should embrace their innate connection with the East.

Recalling the tenets of the NAM discussed by Piškur earlier in this chapter, Maja and Reuben Fowkes explore the possibilities inherent in a “liberated concept of Eastern Europe.” Charting the problematics of the use of the geographical designation in the wake of communism's collapse, the writers nevertheless argue for its relevance, specifically in the context of what they describe as a transnational solidarity inflected by the countries' shared historical experience of socialist internationalism. Not antinationalist but postnationalist, this strategy proves prescient at a time when the region—and Europe as a whole—confronts the rise of right-wing nationalist factions.

Cosmin Costinaș and Ekaterina Degot, in their conversation, parse the shift away from a global or even Eurocentric perspective in favor of a reconsideration of Eastern Europe. Seeing the notion of Eastern Europe as a “building block” of the global—a unique part of a diverse whole—Costinaș reiterates the importance of localizing discourses. Taking a slightly more polemical position, Degot warns against the essentialism and even racism of any pro-nationalist proclivities in either Eastern or Western Europe in the postcommunist period. Concluding with a meditation on how the art of Eastern Europe is being incorporated into the international art scene, Costinaș and Degot seem to appreciate the effort while remaining skeptical of its instrumentalization on the platform of “global” art.

Within the post-Soviet context, Ketī Chukhrov critiques the West for attempting to mold Eastern Europe into its idealized image of neoliberal democracy after 1989. She argues that this approach is not only neocolonial but also futile, due to key epistemological differences between the two. Instead, Chukhrov asks us to look at the former Soviet Union on its own terms, which will help to move beyond Cold War binaries based on shallow readings of historical socialism.

Destabilizing established parameters is also central to Tímea Junghaus’s text. Ascribing a postcolonial reading to the relationship between Europe and Roma people, Junghaus gives examples of how racial bias has been inscribed in historical representations of Roma in art and culture. She also cites ways Roma artists and curators have asserted new kinds of Roma subjectivities on global platforms by delinking, unlearning, and resisting—radical and subversive strategies that are shared among the transnational networks of the so-called margins.

Closing this chapter, Marina Gržinić’s short but powerful text pointedly takes on the neoliberal capitalist ethos of dissolving borders, exposing the imperialist logic underlying the multiculturalism of the 1990s dominant across Europe, including the former Eastern bloc. Instead, Gržinić makes a potent argument for the drawing of borders as perhaps the only effective counter to homogenizing globalization. “[W]e need borders more than ever,” she writes. “[T]o establish a border means to present, to incorporate, to take a clear political stance, to ask for a political act, to draw a line of division that can rearticulate this new world that seems to be without borders . . .”

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## Conversation

HITO STEYERL WITH ANA JANEVSKI AND ROXANA MARCOCI

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**ANA JANEVSKI: 1989 is not only considered a pivotal year in the reconfiguration of the world political order, it’s often seen as a threshold for all sorts of interrelated social and cultural transformations, the “turn of turns,” as it were.**

**To wit, in your book *Too Much World* [2014], you take 1989—specifically the Romanian uprising that year, when protesters invaded the state TV studios—as the symbolic beginning of a new visual order. Tell us more about the connections you see between those events and today.**

**HITO STEYERL:** After following the Romanian revolution on TV, Vilém Flusser developed the concept of images that do not record a given situation but which project an expected



situation. In 1990 he wrote, “It is the image that now triggers events.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, it has become clear that images do trigger politics, especially images on TV and social media, where formatted data attract followers and create momentum. We neglect this aspect at our own risk: it has been a potent mechanism for populist forces lately. Whatever is circulated on monopolist social-media platforms is, to a certain extent, formatted by algorithms that privilege certain kinds of “content,” creating zones of visibility and invisibility. It is interesting right now to compare the discourse around “fake news” on social media and some TV networks with the memory of state propaganda TV in socialist Romania. I am not saying this is the same—obviously, it is definitely not. But contemporary forms of media are also creating a new set of major social problems in relation to propaganda, censorship, and disinformation, this time on a much wider scale. So will anyone storm Facebook, VKontakte, or Weibo as they stormed the state TV studios during the Romanian revolution? If so, who? Putschists? Protesters? The organized right wing? It is extremely interesting to rewatch [Harun] Farocki and [Andrei] Ujică’s *Videograms of a Revolution* from this perspective today, because it clearly shows that the storming of the Romanian TV studios was an extremely conflicted event on many levels.

**AJ: What about the era before the turning point of 1989, specifically the experience of socialist internationalism—is that important for the current moment, whether in terms of solidarity, people’s struggle for decolonization, alternative routes of cultural exchange, or . . . ?**

HS: Socialist internationalism was tied both to Industrial Age ideas of workerism and, in most places, to authoritarian top-down modes of governance. Thus, in order for it to make any sense today, it needs to be completely reimagined. It’s like asking: do we still need boats after the *Titanic* sank? Sure, people do need some sort of flotation device, or some might literally drown, but to build the *Titanic* anew will not help. Spare parts have been discontinued, and the factory itself turned into a launch support for the oligarch-financed colonization of Mars, staffed by robots.

**ROXANA MARCOCI: Eastern Europe, of course, is part of the global contemporary art scene, perhaps now more than ever. Given the technological conditions of globalization, would you say that the constant, often undiscerning production—of images, soundbites, texts—leads to further accelerated consumption, in a trajectory we can trace to the late seventeenth century, or are we now in a different place entirely, within an entropic bazaar where the cultural consumer can no longer assimilate culturally or discerningly engage sociopolitically, thus foreclosing the utopian side of commodity production?**

HS: If the contemporary art world were a bazaar, that would be great. It would be a market woven by human relations in which people from many walks of life talk to one another and communicate. I would love it if the art world were similar to a *čaršija* or a souk, and in some parts, it is. But the situation you describe relates to a different part of the art world, which works more like an entropic mall, now constituted to a certain extent by postdemocratic govcorps (government-corporations). Another aspect of this is the mega art fair, with only corporation-size galleries left, booths soon to be manned by

1— Vilém Flusser, “Fernsehbild und politische Sphäre,” in *Von der Bürokratie zur Telekratie. Rumänien im Fernsehen*, ed. Keiko Sei (Berlin: Merve, 1990), 112.



Hito Steyerl. *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A Fucking Didactic Educational*. Mov File. 2013. Video (color, sound), 14 min.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds

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bot attendants and stupid AIs—thus completely eradicating the type of bazaar where traders actually talk to people and the market is created through such human interaction. But cultural consumers will remain, albeit as unemployed populations who need to be pacified through entertainment. And there will always be something interesting, even if it's not called art, because, after all, humans are curious and imaginative beings.

**RM: In nearly all its operational spheres, art in the global age remains defined and prescribed by white masculinist hegemony. Do you find critique, and especially social critique (the art not governed *like that*, according to Michel Foucault), still an effective way to challenge authorial authority?**

HS: Critique is fine, as such; negativity is necessary. But clearly the para-academic habit of “critique” has, within the past few decades, turned into ritual nagging, without any consequences except infighting and division. Let me explain: in specific environments with specific social rules, critique might actually *do* something. It might act like a contract or software that sets certain actions—change or improvement—in motion. But this environment does not exist (if it ever existed). Critique only becomes active if it is embedded into some kind of social relations that could enforce or at least encourage consequences. This clearly does not apply to most power structures today, which simply couldn't care less.

So as a kind of dystopian substitute, the habit of critique has, in many cases, deteriorated into shaming and blaming, creating constant purging and fragmentation. Since this type of critique is powerless in relation to power, it starts punching down or sideways. It sometimes manifests as a self-victimization that reeks of entitlement, like a vicious derivative of guilt-driven puritanism. Social media are playing a large part in this development. I think that the most radical and unusual step would not be unlimited further critique, but if for once a couple of people agreed on something and focused on building structural agreement among one another.

**RM: You ended your text *Kobanê Is Not Falling* [2014] with a question: “What is the task of art in times of emergency?” What does it mean to be an artist today—in the context of increasing isolationism (Brexit, “America First” foreign policy), the global resurgence of far-right movements, reprisals against minorities, and a relentless drive to expand global capitalism?**

HS: In the text you mention, I never answered my own question for a reason. Many of the so-called solutions put forth by the art field during the last twenty years or so, all the big proposals and pretensions, mainly led to grotesquely bloated corporate shows and the “blockbusting” of permanent failure. This is a dead end. Maybe first of all one could just scale back exaggerated expectations and realize that art, after all, is not that important. Maybe what art can do now is what it is best at: look, listen, and interpret with precision, imagine without compromise or fear. But also without being instrumentalized to ever more grandiose ends. This just leads to endless frustration, toxic moralizing, and deadlocks. Deflating art's pretensions, its blockbusterism, its megalomaniacal delusions about its own power would be a first step.

# Solidarity in Arts and Culture: Some Cases from the Non-Aligned Movement

BOJANA PIŠKUR

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)<sup>1</sup> functioned as a social movement in the international system, a third way between the [Eastern and Western] blocs, aiming to change the existing global structures and to create a more just, equal and peaceful world order. It was, in its essence, an anti-imperialist, anticolonial and antiracist movement.<sup>2</sup>

The NAM thus represented the first major disruption in the Cold World map. While the 1961 Belgrade Summit was mostly an Afro-Asian and Yugoslav project, the movement acquired worldwide dimensions with the inclusion of Latin America<sup>3</sup> a few years later. The fate of this constellation of energies is probably one of the least understood phenomena of our times, but it is certain that its disappearance from the world's political stage is directly linked to the rise and victory of neoliberalism, especially after 1989.

Great importance was given to art and culture in cultural politics influenced by the NAM and specific types of socialism. I will focus on transnational solidarity projects such as the Museo de la Solidaridad in Santiago, Chile, the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Art and the Week of Latin America in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and argue that this was solidarity as a national project. Political solidarity within the NAM, economic solidarity across the "Third World" (which was stimulated by the New International Economic Order in the 1970s), and cultural solidarity<sup>4</sup> were not only in line with the official approach and pragmatic goals set by the non-

aligned governments, they were an expression of a much wider historical and political moment of peoples' struggle for decolonisation and liberation in the world.

Fifty years ago, Yugoslavia was still a relatively prosperous socialist non-aligned country with a fairly well-developed economy, following principles of self-management. In 1970, Salvador Allende, the Unidad Popular party candidate, was sworn in as the first elected Marxist president of Chile. The Chilean Path to Socialism—*socialismo chileno*—was widely admired in some parts of the world. At the Non-Aligned Summit in Algeria in 1973, Chile became a full-time member (for less than a year).

Words like solidarity, fraternity, equality, peace and the fight against imperialism, colonialism and apartheid resonated at the NAM summits, at UNESCO seminars on culture, at political rallies around the world, in museums . . . It also seemed as though art and politics were united in their quest to create utopian models adapted to social and political changes. It is no coincidence that experimental museology and concepts such as the integrated museum, the social museum, the living museum and the museum of the workers were widely discussed in the so-called Global South.

There seemed to be a specific "socialist inspired internationalism." In 1956, at the UNESCO conference in New Delhi, shortly after the 1955 Bandung conference, representatives of the Third World (or "the South," south as a critical geopolitical entity) dedicated themselves to promoting alternative routes of cultural exchange,<sup>5</sup> different from those in the First and Second Worlds. A wave of new biennials sprung up in NAM countries, such as those in Alexandria, Medellin, Havana, Ljubljana, and Baghdad, for instance. Amílcar Cabral, anti-colonial thinker and political leader from Guinea-Bissau, wrote: "People are only able to create and develop the liberation movement because they keep their culture alive despite the continual and organized repression of their cultural life and because they continue to resist

1 — In former Yugoslavia, especially during the 1970s, many books were published on the NAM subject, such as: R. Petković, *Teorijski pojmovi nesvrstanosti*, Rad, Belgrade, 1974; *Edition Nesvrstanost i nesvrstani*, Rad, Belgrade, 1974; *Skupovi nesvrstanih zemalja*, Međunarodna politika, Belgrade, 1974; or more recently, T. Jakovina, *Treća strana Hladnog rata*, Fraktura, Zagreb, 2011.

2 — A. W. Singham and S. Hune, *Non-Alignment in an Age of Alignments*, The College Press, Zimbabwe, 1986, p. 1.

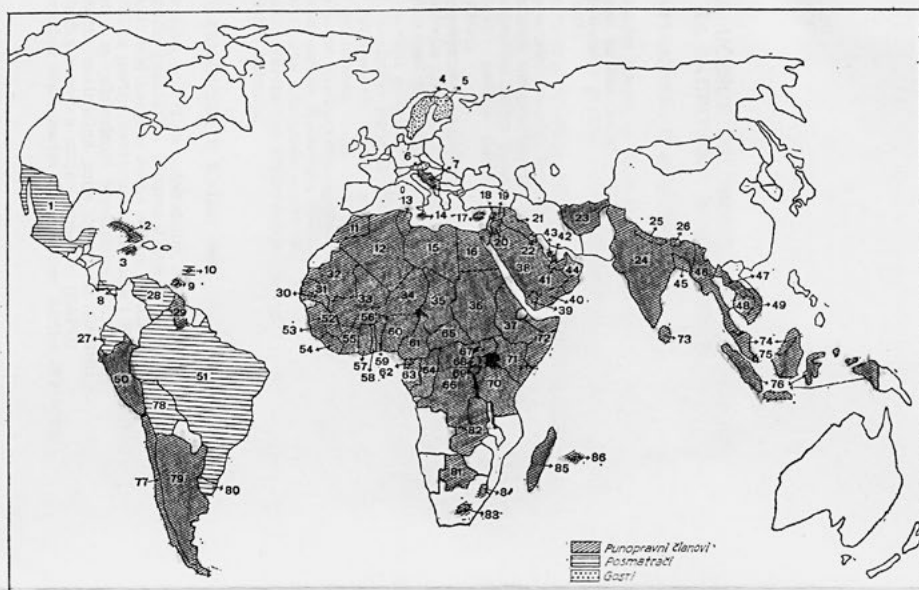
3 — Some countries of Latin America were either members or observers, depending on their political situation.

4 — Projects such as *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, 1978; *Artist of the World Against Apartheid Initiative*, 1980; *Exhibition in Support of the Nicaraguan People*, 1981, as researched by Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri. See Rasha Salti, "Postcolony and the Museum: Curatorial Practice and Decolonizing Exhibition Histories," *L'Internationale Online*, 16 September 2015: [http://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising\\_practices/37\\_around\\_the\\_postcolony\\_and\\_the\\_museum\\_curatorial\\_practice\\_and\\_decolonizing\\_exhibition\\_histories](http://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/37_around_the_postcolony_and_the_museum_curatorial_practice_and_decolonizing_exhibition_histories).

5 — A. Gardner and C. Green, "Biennials of the South: On the Edges of the Global," *Third Text* 27, no. 4 (2013).

# 4th Non - Aligned Movement Summit, 1973, Algeria

GRAFIKON — ZEMLJE UČESNICE IV KONFERENCJE NESVRSTANIH ZEMALJA



- |                      |   |  |                      |
|----------------------|---|--|----------------------|
| 1. Meksiko           | 25. Nepal                                 | 44. Oman   | 64. Kongo            |
| 2. Kuba              | 26. Butan                                 | 45. Bangladeš  | 65. Centralna Afrika |
| 3. Jamačka           | 27. Ekvador                               | 46. Burma  | Republika            |
| 4. Švedska           | 28. Venecuela                             | 47. Laos   | 66. Zair             |
| 5. Finska            | 29. Gvajana                               | 48. Kambodža   | 67. Uganda           |
| 6. Austrija          | 30. Gambija                               | 49. Južni Vijetnam (Privremena revolucionarna vlada) | 68. Ruanda           |
| 7. Jugoslavija       | 31. Senegal                               | 50. Peru   | 69. Burundi          |
| 8. Panama            | 32. Mauritanija                           | 51. Brazil   | 70. Tanzanija        |
| 9. Trinidan i Tobago | 33. Mali                                  | 52. Gvineja  | 71. Kenija           |
| 10. Barbados         | 34. Niger                                 | 53. Sjeverna Leone                                   | 72. Somalija         |
| 11. Maroko           | 35. Čad                                   | 54. Liberija   | 73. Sri Lanka        |
| 12. Alžir            | 36. Sudan                                 | 55. Obala Slonovače                                  | 74. Malezija         |
| 13. Tunis            | 37. Etiopija                              | 56. Gornja Volta                                     | 75. Singapur         |
| 14. Malta            | 38. Saudijska Arabija                     | 57. Gana   | 76. Indonezija       |
| 15. Libija           | 39. Jemen — Arapska Republika             | 58. Togo   | 77. Čile             |
| 16. Egipat           | 40. Jemen — Narodna Demokratska Republika | 59. Dahomej  | 78. Bolivija         |
| 17. Kipar            | 41. Ujedinjeni Arapski Emirati            | 60. Nigerija   | 79. Argentina        |
| 18. Liban            | 42. Katar                                 | 61. Kamerun  | 80. Urugvaj          |
| 19. Sirija           | 43. Bahrein                               | 62. Ekvatorijalna Gvineja                            | 81. Botswana         |
| 20. Jordan           |   | 63. Gabon  | 82. Zambija          |
| 21. Irak             |   |  | 83. Lesoto           |
| 22. Kuvajt           |   |  | 84. Svazilend        |
| 23. Avganistan       |   |  | 85. Madagaskar       |
| 24. Indija           |   |  | 86. Mauricijus       |

by means of culture, even when their political and military resistance is destroyed.”<sup>6</sup> The 1970 Lusaka NAM resolution in Zambia stated: “World solidarity is not only a just appeal, but an overriding necessity; it is intolerable today for some to enjoy an untroubled and comfortable existence at the expense of the poverty and misfortune of others.”<sup>7</sup> In 1972, a UNESCO seminar was organised in Santiago, at which museum workers discussed a new type of social or integrated museum that would link cultural rehabilitation with political emancipation. It would be socially progressive without being ideologically restricted by any political representation. At the 6th Conference of the Non-Aligned Countries in Havana, Cuba, in 1979, Josip Broz Tito, president of Yugoslavia, spoke of the “resolute struggle for decolonisation in the field of culture.”<sup>8</sup> The emphasis was on questioning intellectual colonialism and cultural dependency. The idea was not only to study the Third World, but to make the Third World a place from which to speak. “Location” (“a horizon beyond modernity, a perspective of one’s own cultural experiences,” according to Enrique Dussel) was the philosophical theme addressed in 1974 when the “South-South Dialogue” between thinkers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America was initiated. The first meeting was held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

One common issue shared by the NAM states was the question of cultural imperialism. Secondly, there was a need to create different modernities, the so-called “epistemologies of the south,”<sup>9</sup> as an understanding of the world that was larger than the Western understanding of the world. The NAM had made cultural equality one of their most important principles very early on, at the Cairo conference in Egypt in 1964. This meant, on the one hand, that a number of African and Asian countries sought to regain works of art which had been taken out of their countries during colonial times and put in various museums in New York, London and Paris, and, on the other hand, that people who had been denied their culture in the past started to realise the emancipatory role it

played in their lives. The cultural development of decolonising countries became as important as their economic development. Importantly, this culture was no longer meant only for the elites; art and culture were to be accessible to all. We could even say this was a kind of epistemological solidarity.

A new-world information and communications system was formed, the so-called Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool,<sup>10</sup> which worked as an international collaborative cooperation between Third World news agencies whose main objective was to decolonise the news, provide its own mass-media channels and to offer counter-hegemonic reports on world news concerning the developing nations.

### The Cases

The concept of non-alignment became the main component of Yugoslavia’s foreign policy as early as the late 1950s. Socialist revolutions had a lot in common with anticolonial and anti-imperialist revolutions, which made the Yugoslav emancipation in the context of socialism particularly significant. As Singham and Hume put it: “It was Tito who revealed to the Afro-Asian world the existence of a non-colonial Europe which would be sympathetic to their aspirations. By bringing Europe into the grouping, Yugoslavia helped to create an international movement.”<sup>11</sup> President Tito travelled to various African and Asian countries on so-called Journeys of Peace (for example, his famous visit to Western African countries on the *Galeb* [Seagull] ship in 1961) to support their independence and to express solidarity with the newly independent countries. These “solidarity” travels subsequently acquired a strong economic (and cultural) dimension and resulted in new spheres of interest and exchange among NAM countries (architecture, student exchange programmes, trade fairs, industrial design, art exhibitions).

In 1984, the Josip Broz Tito Gallery for the Art of the Non-Aligned Countries was inaugurated in then Titograd, Yugoslavia, with the aim to collect, preserve and present the arts and cultures of the non-aligned and developing countries. The document was adopted at the 8th summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, and soon after the gallery became a common institution for all the NAM countries. Unfortunately, their goal to create a triennial of art from the NAM countries never happened because of the war

6 — A. Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches by Amílcar Cabral*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983.

7 — “Resolutions of the Third Conference of Non-Aligned States,” Lusaka, 1970, viewed 26 September 2016.

8 — See, for example, a special issue of the newspaper *Delo*, 4 May 1982, Ljubljana, Slovenia (Yugoslavia), dedicated to the anniversary of Josip Broz Tito’s death (he died on 4 May 1980). One chapter is about his role in the Non-Aligned Movement.

9 — B. de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, Routledge, 2016.

10 — It functioned from 1975 to the mid-1990s and was based in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

11 — Singham and Hume, p. 52.

in Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, the collection still exists today and includes over 1,000 works, mostly donations from all over the world.

The Ljubljana (International) Biennial of Graphic Arts started in 1955 at the Moderna Galerija. This biennial was specifically linked to the non-aligned cultural politics. It was founded by a long-time director of the museum, Zoran Kržišnik, who saw this as a possibility “for a projection of values such as the presence of freedom, modernity, democracy, openness and so on in society.”<sup>12</sup> In an interview, he pointed out that he had shown President Tito that the Biennial of Graphic Arts was actually a materialisation of what was being referred to as openness, then seen as non-alignment. The approach for acquiring works for the exhibitions was twofold: on one hand, the biennial jury made their own selections in order to get the best representatives of, for example, the École de Paris, and on the other, some countries were offered direct discretionary invitations so they could present whatever they wanted without interference. Consequently, the biennial exhibited “basically everything, the whole world,” especially after the first NAM conference in 1961. The jury included representatives of museums such as the Guggenheim, the Tate Gallery, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, as well as the curator-critics Pierre Restany, Harald Szeemann, William Lieberman and others.

In Chile, the Museo de la Solidaridad was born in 1971 out of the visionary idea of a handful of individuals later named the International Committee of Artistic Solidarity with Chile, with Mario Pedrosa, a Brazilian art critic in exile there, serving as its president.

Among the committee members were Dore Ashton, an art critic from the United States; Pablo Neruda, poet and ambassador of Chile in Paris; Edy de Wilde, director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; Giulio Carlo Argan; Louis Aragon; and Harald Szeemann. The founding idea was articulated in April during “Operation Truth,” when President Allende invited international artists and journalists to “understand the process that his nation was living.” He sent an appeal to artists to support the new path Chile was taking by donating works of art. Donations from all over the world started to arrive, 600 works in the first year of the museum’s existence alone, in a heterogeneous

mixture of styles: Latin American social realism, Abstract Expressionism, Geometric style, Art Informel, experimental proposals, and conceptualist works. Harald Szeemann, who was at the time directing Documenta 5, sent a letter to all the participating artists asking them to donate works of art to the new museum in Chile.

The act of donation was a political act in itself. It was also a museological experiment; “a network of people from the world of culture who contributed works, ideas and connections toward the shaping of a museum that was not hierarchical, but transversal and polyphonic.”<sup>13</sup>

Justo Pasto Mellado summarised the situation thus: “While in other parts of the world, some works by the avant-garde bring into question the legitimacy of museums, in those places where the history of museums is incomplete, the desire for one becomes an absolute imperative.”<sup>14</sup>

This museum was in tune with cultural democratisation underpinning the party politics: to bring art out of the museums and into non-specialised spaces. This was done through approaches such as the “Tren popular de la cultura,” the “casas de la cultura,” travelling shows in tents, protest posters, murals, etc. Pedrosa spoke about the connection between art and workers, especially Chilean copper miners. President Allende seemed to understand the new mission of museums when he exclaimed at the museum inauguration in 1972: “This is not just a museum anymore. This is a museum of the workers!”<sup>15</sup>

This museum experiment ended abruptly in 1973 with Pinochet’s coup d’état. Throughout the dictatorship, the art collection remained in the basement of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of Chile, which was in the hands of the military. Dore Ashton was declared persona non grata, and Pedrosa had to go to another exile, to Mexico. Some works were lost, and some destroyed.

Subsequently, the world reacted. The 1974 edition of the Venice Biennale was atypical: with a “clear and distinct antifascist choice of direction.”<sup>16</sup> The Permanent Working Group of

13 — I. García Pérez de Arce, “Museo de Solidaridad / Museum of Solidarity Santiago, Chile: The Polyphonic Museum of Salvador Allende,” in *Politicization of Friendship*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2014, p. 45.

14 — J. P. Mellado, “Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende: The History of a Collection,” in *Lo Spazio dell’uomo*, Fondazione Merz, Turin, 2008.

15 — “Palabras del presidente de la Republica,” typescript, 1972. From the archives of the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, Santiago, Chile.

16 — Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, *La Biennale di Venezia, Annuario 1975 / Eventi del 1974, Stamperia di Venezia*, Venice, 1975, p. 72.

12 — P. Grafenauer, in *The Biennial of Graphic Arts—Serving You Since 1955*, on the occasion of the 30th Biennial of Graphic Arts Ljubljana, 2013.

the Biennale dedicated a series of artistic activities to the freedom of, and solidarity with, Chile. These took place all over Venice, in the industrial suburbs, parks, factories, garages, sports grounds . . . and involved films, music, performances, an exhibition of posters (in the Giardini and in the Italian pavilion), discussions, and sixty-two murals painted by the Salvador Allende International Brigade.

Along similar lines was the Week of Latin America<sup>17</sup> in 1977, in the Belgrade Student Cultural Center, which consisted of a series of art events dedicated to burning political issues (debate about military regimes and the politics of non-alignment in Latin America), with an emphasis on art practices that “closely connect artistic and revolutionary acts.” The Salvador Allende Brigade painted a mural entitled *Solidarity*.

This should not be considered as some kind of exoticism of the past, nor should it harbour nostalgia for the movement itself, as we know that many NAM states were quite far from the principles the movement promoted. From today’s perspective, the concepts of nation-states, identity politics and exclusive national cultures, which appeared in cultural political agendas at the time, can be seen as highly problematic. The concept of solidarity also needs to be treated with caution: with whom are we solidary and how are we solidary? How can we avoid the “white

savior complex”?<sup>18</sup> And what should be done with the fact that Syria, Pakistan, Libya and most African states are still members of the NAM?

Nevertheless, the movement should not be forgotten insofar as it envisioned forms of humanism that took as a starting point the life of peoples and societies that had been forcibly placed on the margins of the global economic, political and cultural system. The struggle against poverty, inequality and colonialism in the world system coupled with transnational solidarity could be useful in a reconsideration of the history and legacies of the NAM today, at a time when colonialism has become more than evident once again.

In culture we are already doing that at some level by being involved in various networks, alliances, museum federations, knowledge production platforms, etc. These do not consist only of cultural operators, but join forces with social movements, grass-roots organisations and many others. They take into consideration the question of how relevant these ideas are to the development of international solidarity in the sphere of culture, transversally linking it with politics. Simultaneously, new models of being together in the world are envisioned, models that would enable us to live and not merely to survive, to paraphrase Svetlana Alexievich.<sup>19</sup>

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17 — J. Vesić, “The Week of Latin America: Murals by Salvador Allende (Ramona Parra) Brigades—‘Non-Aligned’ Street Art,” c. 2012/2014, part of Parallel Chronologies: An Archive of East European Exhibitions, <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/the-week-of-latin-america-murals-by-salvador-allende-ramona-para-brigades-non-aligned-street-art/>.

18 — G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

19 — S. Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, London, 2016, p. 30.

## Minor Media Normality in the East

INKE ARNS AND ANDREAS BROECKMANN

### 1. Autogenerative Europe

*In our imagination, Eastern Europe was always black and white. Traveling to East Germany or Poland meant suddenly leaving colorful Western Europe and entering a movie from the forties or fifties. Later we simply couldn’t remember having seen any color, not the green of the trees, nor the red of the brick buildings. When we went to the movies to see a film by Wajda, Kieślowski or Tarkovsky, the filmmaker’s experiments with color only reinforced*

*our image of the East as gray. Europe clearly had an ideologically motivated neurosis when it came to the perception of color.*

This particular brand of European Orientalism has now grown tired. Nearly ten years after the social upheaval in Eastern Europe, these countries have ceased being part of an “Eastern bloc.” Each is stepping out of the shadow of the Soviet empire and taking on once again its own particular face in the international

arena. Each is becoming recognizable as a participating unit of the European patchwork.

While the European Union attempts to somehow defend the idea of a Fortress Europe, and the negotiations with the Central European countries for their admission into it reveal its own shortcomings; while NATO uses its plans for expansion to try to hold on to the front of the Cold War by shoving it along; while the arms of western Europe are constantly opening and closing, opening and closing to refugees and immigrants, the network of business contacts and personal acquaintances branches outward, bringing the Europe of Europeans slowly but surely closer together. Little media such as letters, the fax, local radio and Internet mailing lists are contributing far more to mutual understanding than governmental objects of prestige, such as the German-French television project ARTE or the exclusive efforts of the European Commission. In order to understand European differences and put them to productive use, swarms of little sentences, of little images are needed.

Of course, genuine heroes do occasionally appear on the domestic screens. In the mid-eighties, a new pop star emerged on the global media scene: Gorby Superstar, a Soviet Secretary General who could walk, talk and laugh, a real guy, even if he was a Russian. After the senilocracy of the period of stagnation beginning in the mid-seventies, from 1985 on, Gorbachev set off on his travels, speaking to his own people about glasnost and perestroika, signaling his willingness to open up a dialogue with Reagan, presenting himself as a decent, charming sort of fellow to Thatcher, and almost penitently to the Pope, chatting with Kohl, building trust—and all that in front of television cameras. Finally, here was someone who could sell bad politics like cola and ice cream as well as any western advertising agency, and who could play the modern propaganda machine better than NATO and the Communist Party combined.

No wonder that for the other countries of the Warsaw Pact—East Germany, for example—Gorbachev was to become a factor of ideological insecurity and, therefore, a domestic political threat. In June 1987, three British rock groups played a concert at the Brandenburger Tor. They turned the speakers to the east where thousands of young people had gathered to listen to the concert. When the situation built to a confrontation with the East German security forces, they called out not only “Down with the Wall!” but also “Gorbachev, Gorbachev!” because they presumed he was on their side

in this matter. Two years later, at the celebration for the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, Gorbachev himself justified the presumption with the words he delivered to the gentlemen of the Council of East Berlin. They’d come too late and would immediately be punished by life, the demonstrating masses and the television viewing public.

The changes set off by the Gorbachev fan club occurred at a time when things seemed to have actually happened when a camera was present. Like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the second Gulf War, the coup in Russia or the televised revolution in Romania, these can be classified first and foremost as media events. Politics, national as well as international, are increasingly becoming merely a reaction to media events, to whatever is perceived by the media, and consequently, the public, which forces the hand of politics. Supposedly, President Clinton’s advisors decided in 1992 that the war in Yugoslavia was not of U.S. national interest, and so kept relevant information from the president. This changed when Clinton, in a Tokyo hotel, happened to see television reports about the siege of Sarajevo and insisted on U.S. intervention.

Such influence of the media, and, at the moment, particularly television, is, of course, not news. As early as the First World War, battles were fought or halted as a result of public opinion on the home front. And the photographers of the nineteenth century and Greek philosophers were also aware that media representation did not merely reflect but, rather, constructed reality. This is why it’s difficult to determine how the famous Parisian reality crisis came about exactly in the eighties (Baudrillard, Virilio). One fortunate consequence of the Party’s propaganda was that the media on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain was never perceived as the source of reality production, whereas in the West, this illusion was clung to fiercely. The techniques of dealing with the media such as whispering, turning a deaf ear or reading between the lines are aspects of such useful Central European virtues—hesitancy, skepticism and irony.

Throughout the Cold War, the public propaganda machines of the East and West told their great stories of the crime-ridden system of exploitation and of the Evil Empire. At the same time, the readers and watchers in the East were better prepared for what was to follow, not only for matters affecting the pseudo-East, namely, learning how to live, as the Agentur Bilwet put it, in the society of the debacle. The creative engagement with the impossible, the avoidance



of the seemingly necessary, the refusal to identify oneself negatively with inevitable failure—Motto: The reward of playing dumb is free time—those are the survival tactics of the post-industrial society. The little stories of this tradition most commonly told by the small, independent propaganda machines—the pamphlet distributors and poster plasterers, the local pirate radio stations, student papers and the networks circulating forbidden books and records—this isn't so much a romanticized review as a glance into the toolbox of the everyday media.

## 2. Eastern Europe Watching

One of the first lessons to be learned as the Iron Curtain rose was that the East bloc was hardly a bloc at all in the sense of a homogeneous, solid whole. Various mentalities and various socialisms had been brought together under red flags large and small which waved more for Big Brother than for the other sisters. Distance, and often a deep skepticism, separated the countries of the Warsaw Pact.

[...]

There was also a plethora of varying maps in the media, a transparency and translucency of borders, not only to the West but also within the East. Hence 80% of East Germans could receive West German television with their normal household antennae, and only in the valley of the clueless, the southeastern region around Dresden, was anyone safe from the onslaught of Western propaganda. But there, they had Polish and Czech television, and so, a differentiated image of the various televisual standpoints of the states in the neighboring countries. In western Romania, as the Romanian-German author Richard Wagner reports, besides the Romanian programs, one could also catch the Yugoslavian and the Bulgarian. Wagner writes in one of his stories: "The game's about to begin, he says. The Serbs are showing the derby on TV. And there's going to be a movie tonight. With the one with the big tits. You can actually see something when they show it. They don't just cut the whole scene out like ours do."

Besides the national television stations and the official papers which, as Karl Schlögel notes, were just as thin everywhere with the same bad photos and the same chemically sanitized articles, the international Western radio stations with their much wider broadcast area, such as the BBC World Service or the Deutsche Welle, played an extremely important role in the distribution of news and discussions which were not reported by the state media of Eastern

Europe. Of overwhelming importance was the Munich-based U.S.'s Radio Free Europe, which reached all of Central and Eastern Europe via dissidents' broadcasts during the Cold War.

And of course, on the local level there were an abundance of small unofficial media, niche media which were often short-lived and yet could maintain an exchange of information and communication which, according to the official version, could not exist. Records and audio cassettes were just as effective and meaningful, as well as jokes passed on by word of mouth—Radio Eriwan!—traced maps and endlessly circulating copies of books. In countries in which no private use of photocopying equipment was allowed under any circumstances, a multitude of illegal publication strategies for the distribution of ideas were invented, most of which were referred to by the umbrella term *Samizdat*. A related principle was *ramka*, which was originally Polish but then spread to Hungary and elsewhere. Miklos Haraszti writes: "The *ramka* in the East is the equivalent of the photocopier in the West. The recipe for *ramka* goes like this: Soviet power minus electrification. By the way, this cross of silkscreen and offset printer can be built in two hours at home—and is capable of several thousand impressions. There are times when the police, like worrisome gardeners, mow down the boldly sprouting *Samizdat* to the roots, but the *ramka* is ineradicable. *Ramka* is virtual freedom of the press; he with the fingers smeared black with ink, the human-rights professional, points to the free, electronic future." In these times of electronic networking, we should not forget that a hand-press can have a practical dignity which the Internet, with its susceptibility to control, will never attain.

## 3. Soluble History

Each of the Central and Eastern European "revolutions" in the eighties has its own history and series of events in each country: From the Polish "interruptus" to the halted Russian perestroika and the Hungarian slippage to the capitalist goulash, the abrupt collapse of the East German regime to the brutal Romanian Christmas story. In the Baltics, it was song; in Prague, soft-spoken words; in Berlin, candles and bad shoes that rang in the new era.

Although it's clear now in retrospect that there was a certain logic in the developments of the late eighties, from Gorbachev's perestroika, the political liberalization in Hungary and Poland to the occupation of the West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw by East German citizens in the summer of 1989, the

events that late autumn came in a form which was more or less unexpected. The Western media were all over these events, or rather: they wanted to be all over them. Because the events were hard to come by in terms of flight schedules and hotel bookings. Where should a U.S. or Japanese television programmer send a camera crew at the beginning of December 1989: to Berlin to wait for the opening of the Brandenburger Tor; to Prague, where the students were out in the streets; or to dark gray Bucharest, where a Transylvanian self-laceration might occur? Once again, life was punishing those who came too late. Impossible choices and a bonanza for television viewers with a satellite dish who could zap their way among the various glances into the events of the day by watching the news from Berlin, Bonn, Paris, London and Atlanta all at once.

The result was a blanket of suspenseful media happenings that went on for weeks, and we even forgave the live media the endless repetition of the same video, over and over. It was here that life was happening, here that history was happening right in front of our eyes. And not just for Western television viewers, but also and especially for the people in the countries themselves, the medium of television was serving an important catalytic function. For weeks, the people of Leipzig watched their Monday marches on Western television and went out on the streets in even greater numbers the following week. After all, in the end they'd attained their Warholian fifteen minutes of fame. At the symposium "The Media Are with Us!" held as early as April 1990 in Budapest, the art critic Magda Carneci said of the role of television in the Romanian revolution: "Television wasn't simply a giant, tireless eye that continuously beamed the absolutely irrepressible images, but it also served as something of a collective brain: It received, selected and distributed news throughout the whole nation which was utterly essential for the coordination and upholding of the fighting spirit, and created a state of consciousness which was coherently directed toward battle, awareness and victory. Television made the entire population a sort of highly sensitive network within which each individual took part in the act of revolution, both physically and mentally [...] In a certain way, television justified the revolution for most people."

A short time later, the revolutionary reality, in light of the great number of competing authentic documents of the collective experience, naturally ran up against doubt. Hardly four months after the events in December,

Carneci remarked: "Since the first days of the revolution, things have rapidly changed. What one sees now on television about the Romanian revolution is becoming, it seems to me, more and more a fiction." Similar adjustments occurred in East Germany and in Czechoslovakia, where competing versions of the history circulated and called the victory of the little revolutionaries in the street into question. Within a few weeks, what seemed authentic at first on the screen as well as on location was revealed to have an inextricable and contradictory complexity, especially as journalists ceaselessly continued their search for new "facts." Reality and fiction were brought closer together and then blended into each other. The supposed experience of "instant history" had proven itself to be as authentic as a cup of instant, soluble coffee: "If you believe in me, I exist."

For the West, there was the additional difficulty of distilling ways to deal with all that had been gathered by the media. While the good guys and the bad guys were still clearly distinguishable in 1989, and hence, an optimistic, futurist look ahead was called for, the Western perception of the war in Yugoslavia was considerably less sure of itself. But how can a politically and historically complex story be packed into three and a half minutes? Western intellectuals such as Peter Handke, Alain Finkielkraut and Susan Sontag went to Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo in search of the "authenticity of experience" and the "reality of life," a search that had brought German and French artists and intellectuals to opposing trenches in 1914. And while historians and military strategists quarreled over the formulas for understanding and intervention, the media created a perception of a downward trend which would demand action. But the media achieved the opposite, and the reports on the war in the Balkans led to paralysis in Western observers instead of the will to intervene. The media triumph of 1989, when the media could make history, met its Verdun in Dubrovnik, Srebrenica, Gorazde and Sarajevo, where it couldn't stop history.

[...]

### 5. Commonplace Media Art

The borders between journalistic practice and artistic methods are not always sharply delineated. Since 1989, the Eastern European landscape has been in upheaval: It began with a sort of media supernova which resulted in an explosion of commercial radio and television broadcasters. For a while, the public media presented a playground for artists and media activists. The

Romanian artist Călin Dan, who now lives in Holland if they'll allow him to, wrote in 1995: "In Romania, the media environment turned from an ideological desert (prior to December 1989) to a complete jungle. Everything began with the printed media revolution, which created from the very beginning a climate of vulgarity, violence, new-age fabulations, and conspiracy theories. The local pulp fictions and the big global truths were blended in a way that flattened the senses and modified attention. The new radio-scape became another example of the media environment as numerous independent radio stations mushroomed immediately after the revolution, and Bucharest became one of the most interesting radio broadcast cities in Europe."

A friend who was in Skopje in 1995 also reports on a new, extravagant television experience: Late one evening, *The Third Man* was shown by the first program of national Macedonian television. Dan's friend was fascinated; thanks to German television, she had never seen this film in the original English version. Or perhaps, one should say "heard"—there wasn't much to see of the picture. Then, there were French subtitles over which, after a few moments of hesitation, Macedonian subtitles were superimposed. The subtitles covered half the picture. In the upper right-hand corner, the logo of the Western television program which had originally broadcast the film was visible, and the upper left-hand corner of the picture was covered by the logo of the Macedonian national broadcaster. Dan's friend was perplexed. When she asked her Macedonian host about the meaning behind it all, the host replied that surely she had seen the huge satellite disc on top of the roof of the national broadcasting building. She should simply think of it as a sort of giant vacuum cleaner switched to "super-high." All the data sucked up was either stored or immediately broadcast on television.

Enes Zlatar from Sarajevo, an employee of the newly set up Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) there, has a similar report on the media scene in Bosnia after the war: "Independent production of home videos continues. The national TV experiences programmatic and productional involution. The only TV show made by young, creative and professional authors, within the youth programme, is a monthly show, *Vatrene Ulice* (*Streets on Fire*). There is a new phenomenon of the emergence of many small, local TV stations which do not have an interest for author production. The programmes of these stations consist mainly of stolen satellite programmes and bootleg films on VHS."

Strategies and forms of media art were and still are quite different in the individual countries due to the varying possibilities for free access to new media (for example, video cameras, computers, photocopiers, etc.) as well as varying degrees to which "independent" mass media and "divergent" opinions are put up with. For example, while the so-called subcultural or alternative scene in Yugoslavia—especially in Slovenia—has been working with video since the early eighties, and Yugoslavian television—late in the evening, but still!—shows experimental videos, and video art in the eighties in Poland and Hungary could lean on the experimental films of the seventies for support, the situation in countries such as Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania or Bulgaria is entirely different because access to the technical means was not possible, for either political or economic reasons. Despite the difficulties, the group Piratskoe televidenie (Pirate Television, 1988–92) in Petersburg produced alternative, eccentric and mostly illogical television programming which were to be fed into the state television channels with the help of military broadcasting equipment.

Varying strategies in the field of performance as well: When in the eighties the multimedia art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art) weren't tired of their role fronting for the rock group Laibach, "overidentifying" with the socialist ideology of Yugoslavia, publicly and loudly, stirring the audience and the state into a rage, the Czechoslovakian secret organization B.K.S. (Bude Konec Světa—The End of the World Is Nigh) worked in hiding since the mid-seventies on the creation of their own laws, their own structures, their own rituals and their own mythology, their own art and their own tradition; in short, an autonomous culture.

After the analog avant-garde of the eighties, media art went digital in the nineties. New media centers and initiatives have been set up in the last few years in several post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe. They focus on various forms of media art and Internet projects and are increasingly taking an active role in global digital culture. The E-Lab in Riga, the WWWArt Center in Moscow, C3 (Center for Culture and Communication) in Budapest and the SCCA Media Lab in Macedonian Skopje and Bulgarian Sofia are just a few examples.

## 6. Critical Technology

Bart Rijs arrived at an astounding insight in his article in *Volksskrant* (December 2, 1996). Not only has the revolution in Serbia set up its

own home page on the Internet, no: “Even revolutions aren’t what they used to be, since there is the internet. The times of illegal printing-presses in wet cellars, seditious pamphlets spread by revolutionaries in duffle coats, are over.” One could almost come to the conclusion that the author displays the tendencies of a technological utopian: the Internet as the subject of history—the revolutionary home page as the perfect example of the liberating power of computers and the Internet. The conclusion would perhaps be drawn too quickly, according to John Horvath, because ultimately, the revolution is being carried out by Serbians, not the Internet community. Internet access in Serbia is rare. Not that the home page put up by protesting students is useless: on the contrary, it provides us with a personal view of the development of events. But attributing revolutionary qualities to media and technologies leads to a crude misunderstanding of the situation, says John Horvath: “No doubt John Perry Barlow, et al., will distort the reality of what is happening and start extolling the revolutionary virtues of the Internet, thereby missing the whole point of what is going on in Belgrade and, to some extent, downgrade the heroism and courage of those who still revert to the ‘by-gone methods’ of ‘illegal printing-presses in wet cellars’ and ‘seditious pamphlets spread by revolutionaries in duffle coats.’” In a country in which “new” media have still not been widely distributed, the value of the “old” media should not be underestimated.

At the same time, these winter protests of 1996–97 in Belgrade, crowned with a certain success, provide a good example of the surprising power that the supporting help from the Internet can bring about. The local radio station B-92, the Soros-supported oven of cultural and political opposition in the Serbian capital, had been regularly placing news programs in English and Serbian on the Internet as audio files since the fall of 1996, thereby making them accessible to an international audience. When the protests in November and December began to grow stronger, journalists throughout the world, including the widely dispersed Serbian diaspora, could hear the latest news firsthand. When the Serbian government tried to put a stop to the reports by jamming and then shutting down B-92, the manufacturer of Real Audio software presented the station the opportunity to broadcast its program live twenty-four hours a day across the Internet. Local radio, which is only heard over an area of a few city blocks in

Belgrade, was suddenly the most well-known radio station in the world, its signal accessible via a server of the Amsterdam Internet service XS4ALL. The attention of the international public which this aroused put further pressure on the Milošević regime and may well have contributed, after three months of protest, to the eventual recognition of the election results.

Informal networks, newsgroups and Internet mailing lists, which are often used by hundreds of people to keep in contact and exchange news and discussions, also play a role which isn’t to be underestimated. A prominent example is the Nettime list devoted to Net criticism and numerous related themes, from censorship and cryptography to Net art and the WebTV of the future. Nettime, brought to life and moderated by Pit Schultz in Berlin and Geert Lovink in Amsterdam, is an intricate channel, an intellectual medium and an international community, primarily European, but also with members from other continents, the best sort of quick, tactical small medium which, not coincidentally, has been called “the European answer to *Wired*.”

The use of technology in art and media does not necessarily imply either a fundamentally critical or—as the politically correct among us still have not tired of saying—a per se affirmative position regarding technology. It becomes interesting when one asks in what way technology is normative for cultural and social behavior and in what way it “unifyingly” effects this behavior. In the broadest sense, the question is one of how far technology allows or hinders individual artistic expression. Does the introduction of technology—and the immanently unifying or “normative” tendencies of trans-local technologies—even lead to a dissolution of cultural differences or, toned down: does it hinder specific local means of expression? Can technology be “culturally neutral” at all? Or—this was the question brought up at a symposium in Prague in December 1996—“Does media art imply a kind of thinking which is West-oriented and linear, masculine, etc.?” Promptly, from Bratislava, came Martin Sperka’s just-as-difficult opposing question: “Feminist thinking is East-oriented and non-linear?”

The meaning of media cultural practice is not only technological, and therefore, trans-local, in nature, but also constantly presents itself in local contexts. A careful look at local cultures and local codes is therefore urgently required. Various artists from Eastern Europe have repeatedly referred to the meaning of the

always disrupted relationship to “the media.” The Albanian artist Eduard Muka said in an interview in 1996: “We inherited a sort of hatred towards the media. There were a lot of lies, nothing was exact, there was only propaganda. Still there is only one state television channel, and it is even worse than it used to be. The distrust towards media could be a good starting point for artists to make their critical approach in regards to media. I look at media as the highest degree of manipulation humanity has ever invented. In this sense, this could be really used (to) raise social or individual imperatives.” (Eduard Muka, interviewed by Geert Lovink, “Media Art in Albania, First Steps,” Syndicate mailing list, Sept. 29, 1996.) Lev Manovich, too, prompted by Alexej Shulgin’s polemical text “Art, Power and Communication,” underscores the meaning of varying experiences: “The experiences of East and West structure how new media is seen in both places. For the West, interactivity is a perfect vehicle for the ideas of democracy and equality. For the East, it is yet another form of manipulation, in which the artist uses advanced technology to impose his/her totalitarian will on the people.” (Lev Manovich, “On Totalitarian Interactivity,” Syndicate mailing list, Sept. 1996.)

The “heterogenizing” of this sort of thinking in blocs could well be the task of little media. The Agentur Bilwet wrote in 1995 in “Gesellschaft des Debakels” (“Society of Debacle”): “If, as Kroker maintains, in the new Europe, with its new, invisible, electronic war, everything is about ‘the bitter division of the world into virtual flesh and surplus flesh,’ then it is up to the independent media like Zamir, B-92 and ARKZIN to ridicule this split, and in an ironic, existential manner, to give shape to the universal technological desire, cyberspace.”

## 7. Going East, Going West

Traveling in Europe is still difficult but is becoming simpler and more normal. The borders are more porous, even if visa matters still hinder movement in Europe. Slowly the incline is decreasing, and a rediscovery of a not-exclusively-historical cultural space in Europe is beginning.

Seen cynically, cities such as Sarajevo, Moscow and Tirana have been the unrecognized cultural capitals of Europe for years (which other European city has one seen as many pictures of as these?), where the hardcore European cultural inheritance is dealt, the average of which may be presented in Copenhagen, Antwerp and Prague. But why are Albania, the “Balkans,” Russia, Chechnya, etc., covered so thoroughly by the media? Certainly not because they are a “normal” part of Europe, but rather because they maximize the production of media reports. The bloodier it is, the more mass media (especially television) can report live on extraordinary situations (choosing from “ethnic cleansing,” governmental collapse, bloody uprisings, human tragedies, separations, various attempts at coups). The media image of Eastern Europe has been characterized by extraordinary situations; normality is hardly ever communicated.

The importance of the “minor media” on the other hand is that it is able—as opposed to the “major media”—to get across something of the “normality” and to make understanding possible. The “minor stories” as an alternative to the “major stories.” This is what we call the minor media normality in the East.

Excerpted from a text that was originally published in the Nettime mailing list’s “ZK Proceedings 4: Beauty and the East.” Edited by P. Schultz, D. McCarty, V. Cosic, and G. Lovink. Ljubljana: Digital Media Lab, 1997.

# The Postcommunist Robinson

BORIS BUDEN

As is well known, “Robinsonades” are stories in which people imagine the alleged origin of their societies. They take their name from Daniel Defoe’s famous novel *Robinson Crusoe*. As Karl Marx once wrote, such illusions are typical of every new epoch. No wonder that socialism also has one. It was written by Soviet prose authors

Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov under the title *How Robinson Was Made*. The story takes place in the early thirties in the Soviet Union. Here, a short summary:

In order to bind its audience to the publication, the editors of a youth magazine came up with the idea of serializing a novel, a Soviet

Robinsonade. They found a writer, and soon they had the result: a story of a young Soviet man who, after being shipwrecked, finds himself alone on an uninhabited island. Of course, he overcomes all obstacles—wild animals, exotic plants, rainforest, etc.—and after three years is finally rescued by a Soviet expedition. The writer really succeeded in delivering a story that is almost as exciting as the original Robinson Crusoe, but the editor-in-chief was still not satisfied. He found the story not truly Soviet. The readers, he objected, don't feel anything of Soviet reality. "Where is the Party committee, the leading role of the trade union is not visible at all," etc.

So the novel had to be rewritten. In a new version, two men survive the shipwreck, the Soviet Robinson and the president of the local Party committee. But the editor-in-chief is still not satisfied. He wants more people on the island, at least two more Party members and a woman in the role of the treasurer to collect the membership fee. The writer agrees to make these changes, too, but he insists on a love story between Robinson and the young treasurer. However, the editor-in-chief vehemently opposes it. He is strictly against, as he calls it, cheap boulevard-eroticism, but insists unconditionally that the money from the membership fees is secured in a fireproof cash box. So the writer somehow manages to come up with a scene where a wave washes ashore a fireproof cash box. Unfortunately, the novel is still not good enough. The Party meetings on the island must be held regularly. For that reason, one needs a table, a tablecloth, a water jar, a little bell, etc. But it is still not enough. The editor-in-chief wants the masses, "all layers of the working people." An uninhabited island becomes a peninsula. One eventually has to give up on the shipwreck and, finally, on Robinson himself, because "he was anyway an inappropriate gestalt of an unsatisfied man." The editor-in-chief is now pleased. He finally gets a really adventurous text that is also, beyond that, an excellent piece of art.

If it is true what Marx wrote about Robinsonades—and sometimes even he was right—namely that each epoch invents its own one, then we should also be able to imagine a story of a post-communist Robinson.

Such a story could eventually take place in the office of a men's magazine, a local edition of a world-famous brand from the palette of products of an international media corporation, whose head office is situated in one of the Western metropolises. Against the wishes of

many of those working in the post-communist media to launch a new beginning after the collapse of the *ancien régimes*, as though there had been nothing before, their media project often had a dubious prehistory. So our men's magazine also has what we could call its own communist past. Originally, it was a weekly of the socialist youth whose main purpose was to promote healthy socialist values, culture, sports, socially acceptable and useful entertainment and, of course, the Party. Immediately after the regime change, the magazine was privatised under never-clarified circumstances. The new owner was quite a shady character who had worked earlier in the so-called ideological commission of the Party, where he had been responsible for propaganda questions and played a significant role in the former socialist press as a sort of grey eminence of the state censorship. In the meantime, he has changed his political attitude and has become a PR adviser of a new, recently also-ruling party that has found its place in the political spectrum on the far-right, nationalist-populist end. Whether this guy actually bought the magazine and if he did, the amount he paid for it, wasn't known to anyone. However, according to rumours, the old/new secret service was heavily involved in the deal. But times were not easy. Shortly after the democratic change, civil war broke out in the country. The former youth magazine immediately recognized a new chance to carry out its patriotic duty and transformed itself into a smearsheet attacking the local minority. The new editor-in-chief, a former dissident who had recently returned from exile, was appointed. As a matter of fact, he didn't have any journalist experience whatsoever. But this was actually no problem at all, since his militant nationalist and anti-communist editorials had succeeded almost instantly in changing the old socialist image of the magazine. Additionally, thanks to his close connections with the new rulers, they were swimming in money. At that time the magazine also allocated whole pages to letters to the editor. Although the readers didn't have any interesting ideas except some very mean ones about the neighbouring nation, the audience and especially the politicians liked their letters very much. The voice of the people always sounds good even if it has nothing to say. From this time comes also a very dark story that is today only reluctantly remembered. The magazine regularly published lists with names of alleged enemies of the people. Unfortunately, some of those poor guys were later found in a nearby river, dead of course. It is a very sad story, but

was there anything one could do about it? The times were hard, and the birth pangs of democracy are sometimes very, very painful indeed.

Later in the course of normalization, as the post-communist transition was also called, when the young democracy had gone through a certain process of maturing and started to bear its first fruits, that is, when there were no more corpses swimming in the abovementioned river, the magazine changed owners. The new owner was a not-very-well-known but obviously quite powerful Western media corporation which at that time already owned almost all other media not only in the country but in the neighbouring countries as well. Again, nobody knew how much, if anything at all, the new owner paid for the magazine. Around the same time, the old owner suddenly disappeared. According to some rumours he started a new life with his family in a villa in the Swiss Alps. However, there was also another version of his disappearance. Some believed that he lay, set in concrete, in the basement of a new shopping mall on the outskirts of the city. But at that time nobody was actually interested in his fate. Whether the mafia was to blame for privatization or the privatization for the mafia had in the meantime become an academic question. On the other hand, the new big boss was much more interesting. On the top of the Western media corporation was sitting a former very influential European politician who became well known in the region during the war as the head of an international stability program. His prestige and connections he used, obviously, to build the biggest media monopoly in the region, an empire of power and influence that in many respects dwarfed the classical agitprop machinery of the collapsed communist regime.

As consequence of this second privatization, the former magazine of socialist youth finally became a modern men's magazine—an already proven brand in the West with which the corporation had a special contract. An experienced journalist from the house was appointed editor-in-chief (“Finally a true professional”). Actually, he already used to be the editor-in-chief. Even under the terms of the socialist market economy, he succeeded in selling the socialist youth magazine surprisingly well. His formula of success was simple: a little bit of sex & crime, much more pop & rock 'n' roll, and never enough good photography. Already at that time nobody cared much about the ideology. However, certain ideological aspects were still making an impact on the professional consciousness of the old/new editor-in-chief despite all the

post-communist brainwashing. He believed that a means of public communication, even if it was in private hands, still had a social role to play. Such a role, as he was convinced, mustn't necessarily contradict private interest.

And what could be the social role of a commercial men's magazine in the time of post-communist transition? To forge the vision of a new man who embodies all those values that would put a post-communist society on the road to economic prosperity and liberal democracy, and liberate it from old socialist fallacies, [such as] the belief that individuals don't have to be concerned much about their own fate, since there is the society to take care of them. The man of the coming democratic society should be a strong individual, autonomous, enterprising and willing to take a risk, a person full of character who is always prepared to accept a new challenge and to react promptly to ever-changing circumstances. He must be able to create a new world from the ruins of the collapsed system. Who if not Robinson Crusoe could provide a good role model for the new man of post-communist transition? So the idea was to create in the form of a serialized novel a new hero—the post-communist Robinson.

The editor-in-chief quickly found an appropriate author—a young, ambitious female writer (gender balance) who had recently returned from the United States, where she got her PhD in postcolonial studies from a prestigious university.

Her first suggestion that Robinson could be a woman was not accepted: “The men are our target audience, dear colleague.” However, they agreed quickly on a further change in the story. Now, Robinson survived a plane crash.

Soon there was a first version of the story on the desk of the editor-in-chief. The hero was a young manager, also educated in the West, who was flying to the southern hemisphere for his first winter holiday after an exhausting but very successful year in the office of an international company. After he saved himself, as the only survivor from the plane, on a desert tropical island, he struggled with the forces of nature, with wild animals, hunger, loneliness, etc. Thanks to his extraordinary intelligence, wit and endurance, he managed to survive until he was rescued three years later. There was one detail in the story the editor-in-chief was especially thrilled with: the young man who, like so many others from his generation, was raised during communism as an atheist, suddenly—on a dark, stormy night on the desert island—discovered God. So he was rescued as a

deep believer, or, as the story suggested, he was rescued precisely because he was a believer.

“I like the story,” said the editor-in-chief, “but we should work more on some details.” First of all, he found all the items Robinson rescued from the wreckage of the plane—an axe, a fishing set, a pistol, compass, a box with various drugs, etc.—not very convincing. It looked like Robinson was provided with a survival kit. Instead of that, he gave the writer a list of other items that should be washed ashore after the plane crash. Among them: a tie, a famous men’s fragrance, golf clubs, an expensive watch, an exercise machine, and—the writer couldn’t believe her eyes—a private TV channel and even a cabriolet. “What for God’s sake could one do with a cabriolet on a desert island,” she asked desperately. “I don’t know, you are the writer, not me,” returned the editor-in-chief.

In fact, all these items belonged to very famous brands with which the magazine and the media corporation, as its owner, had advertising contracts. So a place had to be found for them in the story. The writer tried really hard and found some use for all of them, even for the TV channel: at the end of the story, Robinson was rescued by a TV team that came to the island to shoot a reality show there. Only for the cabriolet did it seem that there was no solution. However, her talent and diligence bore the palm again. Robinson found on the beach only the logo of a famous car producer. Moreover, on the neighbouring island he bartered it for a good deal of gold and pearls. The natives recognized in this little piece of glittering metal the embodiment of their godhood.

Very proud of her literary achievements, she presented the improved version to the editor-in-chief. He was actually quite happy with the result. *Eau de toilette* as disinfectant, golf club as weapon, TV team as saviours, everything was perfect, except: “But what should one do with gold and pearls on a desert island?” This was, of course, only one more challenge for the writer.

This time there were two castaways saved on the island: Robinson and the employee of a famous Western bank. By the way, it was precisely the bank that had recently supported the media corporation with a large credit in its attempt to speculate with shares on the international real-estate market. He swam ashore with a laptop (of course, also from the list of brands) and immediately opened a branch of his bank on the island. Robinson was now not only able to sell the gold and pearls but also to invest his money. Literally in the last moment before the battery ran out he bought lots of shares on the

expanding financial market and, as the cherry on the cake, a large villa in California with a pool and a sea view.

But the editor-in-chief was now openly disappointed: “This is all too naïve, a cheap promise of happiness. Even an agitprop amateur would never have written this. What is your real idea of capitalism? One makes a small effort and soon is able to spend the rest of his life on a sunbed at the pool, with a sea view of course. The times of utopia are over, dear colleague. Look at our post-communist reality—crime, corruption, poverty, wars. But this is only foreplay for what awaits us in true capitalism. There will be no mercy, no society to take care of us, only the struggle for survival. Like in nature. This is why we have chosen Robinson. He is the best role model for our people if they want to have any future. For that reason, please, no illusions. Communists tried to spread them, and what happened? Communism collapsed. We must finally face hard reality, capitalism as it really is. No gold and pearls will fall from heaven, as you are dreaming of. Even I learned it long ago in the Party school: There is no capitalism without crisis. This was Marx, right?” Despite his criticism, the editor-in-chief encouraged the writer to one last improvement of the story. She went home with only one concept in mind: the crisis.

So one day the waves washed a newspaper ashore. Robinson was jubilant. Finally, some news from civilization. But the whole of the front page was dedicated to only one event, the big stock-market crash. To make it short: he lost everything. The shares of banks and insurance companies he had bought earlier were now worthless. Also the villa in California was lost. With a golf club in his hand, he ran to the bank employee on the other side of the island. However, the guy had already disappeared, of course, with all the gold and pearls. This is what life looks like in nature she wrote, and added: *homo homini lupus*.

“And what now?” asked the editor-in-chief, “We cannot end our story in that way. It is too pessimistic. We shouldn’t discourage the people. One shouldn’t leave them without hope. Otherwise they will become communists again. We need another ending.”

But the writer was now in despair. She had no more ideas. However, the editor-in-chief had one indeed: “I think we need working masses.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, “What does it mean, ‘working masses’?”

“Ah, the youth today. It knows nothing about our communist past, as though life on earth started with the first democratic election.



In America, too, they haven't taught you that at university. Sure, individualism, egoism, every man for himself, alone. But the productive force of collective labour, social solidarity, they have never heard about them, right? I am becoming really nostalgic."

But the writer seemed to get a clue: "If I understand properly, you actually mean the masses of taxpayers, right? They should help us get out of the crisis, I mean, to rescue Robinson, am I right?"

"If you like. I must admit, my old communist language is of no use today. It is too ideological, far from reality. We don't need it any more. So please go ahead with these taxpayers."

Encouraged by his self-criticism, she explained self-confidently: "You know, we call it 'bail out' today. This is like a sort of truly capitalist social contract. I am sure you have heard about it, Hobbes, etc. Each individual gives up a small part of his or her individual freedom and passes it to the sovereign so that all can live in peace and order. Otherwise they would exterminate each other. Here the taxpayers give up a small piece of their tax payments in order to save capitalism. Otherwise they would go down with it. And this is no option, true?"

"Of course, this is no option. So let us bail out our Robinson. We will make a peninsula out of the island and let the masses of taxpayers in."

The young writer was exalted. She was so thrilled by the peninsula idea that she even believed she came upon it herself. The problem was solved. Moreover, now on the peninsula one can get rid of that bloody state of nature. One can even get a sovereign who would bring order and justice. And who can take this role in the time of democracy? People, of course, who else? Thus, free elections, parliamentarianism, rule of law, independent media, a strong civil society, etc. Finally the story made some sense. Not only Robinson, but the future was rescued.

But the editor-in-chief was not so euphoric. He himself found the story actually stupid, a

piece of trash for the so-called target audience (he hated the word). But it was his job, and he has been doing it for years as a matter of routine, without any enthusiasm. To be truly enthusiastic, he believed, is only possible if one is doing something socially meaningful, and this was for sure not the case with this Robinson story and with the imbecilic men's magazine. Actually, his retirement was already due, and he was dreaming about playing with his grandchildren, not about rescuing capitalism. Unfortunately, shortly after he had been promoted to editor-in-chief and after he had seen his pay-slip, he took out a huge loan from the bank, bought a luxurious apartment, got a new car (leased, of course) and started to invest intensively in a private pension fund that was making big gains speculating with shares on the financial market and therefore promised extraordinarily high pensions in the future. Additionally, he was paying for a quite expensive private college in Great Britain for one of his daughters. So there was no other option than to go on that way. In fact, he himself was in a squeeze.

After the writer had gone, he confided his anxieties to his colleague, whom he knew from the times of the socialist youth magazine: "You know," he said, depressed, "I am asking myself who is going to bail *me* out if things go wrong?"

She recalled immediately that famous sentence with which Ilf and Petrov concluded *The Golden Calf*: "Don't worry, like Ostap Bender you'll have to retrain as a caretaker." And then she added, laughing: "Or better yet, as a communist." But he became immediately serious: "This is not funny anymore."

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## It's Too Early to Say

LUCHEZAR BOYADJIEV

During Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, the Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai, was asked about the impact of the French Revolution. Zhou famously commented that it was "too

early to say," though he might have misunderstood the question, confusing the events in France that took place in 1789 with those of 1968. In any event, when a country has survived

quite a few centuries with its own name and territory, though not necessarily with its own political independence, a period for recapitulation of only ten years is indeed “too early to say.”

The general feeling in the field of visual arts concerning the period of the last ten years is (arguably) positive, no question about it. But it could have been a lot, lot better. Why it is not better—for that we blame the political and the business elites. There were too many administrative misfires and too much lack of initiative. The mood of the state is to maintain the status quo, to hark back to the times of ancient Thrace and the First/Second Bulgarian Empires. This has been a powerful drawback working against progress and the benefitting from EU membership. They could have used the unique chances provided by the European common home in order to fast-forward the country’s cultural life of TODAY—by kick-starting democratic, liberal, visual and cultural initiatives. For instance—Bulgaria is not represented at La Biennale di Venezia with its own pavilion; there are very small countries participating, there are failed states presenting their current art there, but a country that is due to chair the EU in 2018 has not made any sustained effort to become visible in the most important art event in the global world. In the eyes of the world, Bulgaria does not exist as a visual arts country. Against this background, it seems like there is not so much to talk about on the topic of ten years of Bulgaria in the EU. As it stands, the state establishment, rather than the independent sector of groups and individuals, is more to blame for the stalemate—the country has the creative potential, but it does not have the state support to make a stand on the global (visual) art scene of advanced contemporaneity. The “good” news is that this status quo has not changed for a lot longer than just the last ten years. The bad news is that there are few indications it might change anytime soon. Let’s enumerate some items from the mixture of grievances and elations, of missed chances and newly available opportunities in the visual arts sector.

1. The good news is that the small but sustainable non-governmental sector in the visual arts has not only survived but prospered, creatively at least. Artists’ groups and associations, collectives, spaces, galleries and the new breed of initiatives or visual art festivals are modestly but constantly springing up (sometimes with only a few editions) in the larger cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, Varna, Ruse and Blagoevgrad, among others. These, as well as those surviving from the mid to late 1990s

(Sofia Underground Festival, Art Today in Plovdiv, ICA-Sofia), always have ideas to realise and work at the highest level; they have grown to conceptualise, fundraise, realise projects and collaborate in the national and international arena. For them and their audience, EU membership has opened many doors—creatively, financially and legally. The most positive example here is the Open Arts Foundation in Plovdiv offering a whole range of activities: educational programs, all-night festivals, artistic and cultural events, publishing, etc.

2. The even better news is that there is a new energy. Younger generations are coming of age with or without the benefit of EU membership. However, the simple fact of the generally improved legal and economic climate, which is more stable, though not necessarily more fair, enables them to look for jobs and to travel for educational and/or professional purposes much more easily. This allows new initiatives to come to the fore—partnerships with equally precarious and flexible younger generations and groups from all over the EU are now easier to form, even with the negligible local funding options. The new festivals in Sofia and Plovdiv are witnesses to the process.

3. The old news is that the values and benefits of contemporary approaches to art—the emphasis on what is happening here and now in life, society and culture—have not caught on with the elite in politics and business. The process is a seesaw of back-and-forth with the responsible state institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture and the National Art Gallery, mostly unable to take decisive, irreversible steps in support of contemporary art practices and their representation both here, in public and private collections, and abroad, at top biennials where national representation is a bit like the Olympics—you have to be “in” if you want to be heard and acknowledged. There are two examples. The positive: in 2007, with EU membership just around the corner, Bulgaria was given the chance by UNESCO to exhibit in Venice, in the Palazzo Zorzi. The impact of the collaboration between the state institutions (with the enlightened decisions made by responsible officials at the time) and the independent sector—curators, artists, collaborators, sponsors—resulted in a highly professional, relevant and memorable national pavilion of contemporary art. The negative: in 2011, the new Ministry leadership at the time nominated for participation at the same forum the project of a curator with much more financial resources than either curatorial experience or presence in

the Bulgarian art scene. This misfire, however, energised a unique gathering of groups and individuals from the visual arts scene to protest against the unmotivated, unprofessional and irresponsible decision. The signatories to the letter of protest were numerous and varied. For the first time in living memory, a professional consensus at a national level was reached. The defect was transformed into an effect, although the concrete results are yet to come . . .

4. The good news is that there are new museums on the block. The bad news is that they are largely dysfunctional as far as contemporary visual art practice is concerned—after a museum reform, the largest museum-level national institutions in the capital Sofia were united under a huge umbrella of nine institutions of various sizes, histories and profiles. The conglomeration has a pyramid-like hard-to-manage structure with little space provided for autonomous initiatives. For instance, SAMCA—the Sofia Arsenal Museum of Contemporary Art—is a museum in name but, in fact, is just a space for temporary exhibitions of the National Gallery of Art. The first stage of the reconstruction of the small historical building was funded by a grant from Norway under the European Economic Area (EEA) program. Though expectations are still not fulfilled, the EU membership has enabled this step in the right direction.

5. The old news is that the National Art Gallery is not collecting new art, with the exception of a single rushed campaign at the end of 2012. One suspects that it was a politically crucial moment. The “good” news is that it is not collecting old art either. It is just there to stand guard at the gates of tradition, and EU membership has done little to change that attitude. The Sofia Municipality has grown to a level which meets expectations and is providing limited funding for building up the collection of contemporary Bulgarian art at the Sofia City Art Gallery. The program started before 2007, and yet in the last few years, it is accompanied by efforts to make it adequate to international standards. As a result, there is at least one public institution one can rely on. Unfortunately, the situation is not all that rosy in the other cities of Bulgaria.

6. One thing has changed for the better, for sure. The rush of investment in new corporate building construction and advertising between 2003 and 2008 changed the visual interface of Bulgarian cities. This was triggered by the expected membership in the EU. It was fuelled by direct capital investment, and it made for a

very aggressive, even vulgar, visual environment in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna and elsewhere. But the 2008 global financial crisis put an end to that, and that was good news. More recently, however, the ambitions of ex-advertisers gave rise to the construction of quite a number of magnificent monuments. The visual presence of aggressive corporate headquarters or fancy billboards is now replaced by monuments. For some time it seemed there would be no end to the proliferation of ever more Disneyland-like public art in the city environments. Although the monument-erection process never reached the incredible levels of a neighbouring country's capital, still there is a trend to create new monuments with glowing eyes in the dark, singing hooves and all-around souvenir-like visual appeal. People seem to like that, but we think it is ill-conceived and inconsiderate. Yet, it is far more preferable to have a few funny monuments here and there than aggressive corporate advertising everywhere. We think that the EU-backed legislature has regulated the process, and now public space in the cities is better protected than before. Of course, that is so only until somebody finds a way to open a few backdoors and have an eye-popping skyscraper in a place where there were only modest and cosy city neighbourhoods in the past.

7. One thing the EU membership has not changed is the scarcity of new private collections of contemporary art. In fact, there are hardly two or three, or less. In fact, no state-level incentives exist for either private or public art collecting. One might have expected that the civilisational example of the art-collecting practices and art-sharing ways tried out in the EU would find fertile ground here—no way, we are alone with our own unenlightened elites that are neither supported when they need it, nor encouraged when they deserve it.

8. The really good news of the last ten years is that membership in the EU has facilitated the free movement of people (read that as art students, artists and curators, dealers and critics, art lovers and just about anybody), goods (thank God there is no longer the irksome red tape when doing shows in Berlin or Malta) and ideas! Being an international artist or curator based in Bulgaria is now infinitely easier than ever before! Yet one wishes to have more and more attractive art events locally; events that would bring in international audiences, or at least international artists, curators and art lovers. That would make the status of being in the EU reciprocal. Yet, even the possibility to travel

at will (money questions presumably solved somehow . . .) is a blessing.

9. Due to all of the above, the good and the bad news—nowadays Bulgaria has a large and active, young and energetic, optimistic and workaholic Visual Diaspora! If you want to research the young artists Bulgaria has to offer (young being defined as anywhere between 20 and 30 and 40 and 50), you better go to Vienna, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, New York, London, Moscow and so on. The Bulgarian art scene will never be big enough, with or without EU membership, to offer proper opportunities for young artists. So, it is great that the EU membership has made it possible for all those ambitious young artists to either stay or go, to study/work here or work/study there. No matter where you live and work, you can still go back and forth to take part in various activities, debates and art scenes. Moreover, living/working in the larger art capitals of Europe exposes the artists to international standards and contexts. When they travel back to Bulgaria for projects or anything else, that enhances the exposure of the Bulgarian art scene itself to the international art context. Even more importantly, it all

happens in a natural way; it is based not on official cultural exchanges, and it does not depend on official cultural policies (of which there are currently none relevant enough to speak of). The Visual Diaspora of Bulgaria is a tangible force to be reckoned with, and that is the best news in the visual arts since 2007.

10. In the summer of 2016, after only nine years in the EU, Bulgaria finally recognised and reunited with Christo. This was prompted by *The Floating Piers*, a project by Christo and Jeanne-Claude for Lake Iseo in Italy: never before had there been so many Bulgarians visiting an installation, working, watching footage about it on TV or taking a stand (pro or con, or really bad . . .) on Christo's art. As they say, better late than never. This may have little to do with EU membership itself, but we hope it will be a good way to reunite with contemporary art and the concerns it is able to voice to the public, both here and there.

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## The Slavs: Redeeming the East in Eastern Europe

SLAVS AND TATARS

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### The How and Not the Why of the Night

The story behind a name, a collective, or an identity is often a convoluted one. Telling it, though, can unlock a particularly heterogeneous inventory of ideas, human relationships, and politics.

The name Slavs started with a love affair between an ethnic Slav and a non-Slav who spoke Russian. After some time, the romance ended, but the collaboration continued unabated as both shared certain intellectual, linguistic, and emotional affinities for peoples very much in the West but still so refreshingly from the East. We chose to call ourselves Slavs to redeem a decidedly subjective selection of passions, thought processes, and behaviors lying at the heart of the largest ethnic and linguistic group in Europe. While the real Slavs increasingly look West, we cherish, caress, and

redress their Eastern heritage. We are caretakers of an unabashedly personal interpretation of a diffuse heritage under siege.

Our friends were incredulous. Was it a reactionary throwback to another era? Our family was concerned. Is there really a common heritage to be found amongst such a thoroughly diverse group of nations? What does socialite Slovenia have to do with a slower, more diligent Slovakia? As is often the case, the problem lies with aspirations. Between what we want to be and what we will always be. Slavs know to wish for the former without curling our lips at the latter.

### We Want to Live Forever, Not Only into the Future but also from the Past

As children, Slavs could never have known that the East would one day move West. What a strange idea. Who would have ever thought a

direction could move in another direction? While Parisians, Londoners, and New Yorkers move East within their respective cities, to escape the ghost of gentrification and real-estate prices, the geopolitical establishment presents the shift west as manifest destiny. Today, a Polack sees himself first as a Polack, second as a European, and third, if pushed, as a Slav. In an attempt at semantic seduction, Eastern Europe now calls itself Central Europe. A new Atlanticism pulses between Poland and the Ukraine. But such maneuvers often hide an unforgiving past. For too long now the Slav has faced the sunset, and too often forgets to bask in the morning sun. We try to correct that position. Like archaeologists of the everyday, Slavs aim to excavate those singular moments when the Tatar and the Mongol free themselves from 700 years of tattered revisionism. We want to be evenly tanned. So we face Eurasia only to bring it to bear on what remains for us an admittedly, and unashamedly, Eurocentric culture.

Slavs come from far away but are no closer to understanding where “here” begins and “there” ends. The Slavic penchant for the absurd stems from a glut of being dislodged, often from within, as if from one’s own present. Displacement happens long before the search for work or studies; it happens *in utero*.

But Slavs at home are no less displaced than Slavs abroad. We are not nomads. We are rooted to one too many places. What’s more: the places in our heads and hearts sometimes fail to recognize the ones on the maps and vice versa. We are the hair on a mother’s head, pulled in different directions by her numerous children. It hurts but, as John Cougar once sang, it hurts so good. The country we call home, the country we used to call home, and the country we dream to call home are all very distinct and disparate places. It is the result of a productive schizophrenia: we are in all of them at once, a ravishing sensation but one tempered by the slow, sobering devastation of never being in any one entirely.

Slavs do not mince words. Nor are we consensual. Criticism by its very nature must sting. But that is no excuse to turn to a qualifier for an antidote. “Constructive” criticism is simply a less frontal and partially handicapped term. Fat-free butter has no place in Slavs’ critical vocabulary.

### **The Sweet Long Run**

Slavs do not *spend* time. In the Slavic thesaurus, under “duration” there is no dollar sign. Time is not money because there always was plenty of the former but never much of the latter. For half a century, the two did not even occupy the same

latitude and longitude. Now, though money is bountiful for the select few in certain Slavic countries, time remains somewhat antipodean to late capitalism. We do not measure time with colleagues, friends, or family in barter-like terms of dinner, a coffee, or a drink. Slavs might stop by your home not for half an hour but half a month, not leave the house, not do much of significance, in the sense of being productive, but simply be present and *pass* the time with you.

Slavs daydream. Picking up the pieces from an oft-shattered vase, we glue them back together defiantly, knowing full well the vase will be tipped over once again by a clumsy history. When Slavs dream, it is a heavy, almost catatonic dream. One so removed from reality that it redeems the very radicality of what a dream originally suggested: another world, not this one, one where things were not possible but impossibly possible. Yona Friedman once said, “Everything is not possible, but there is more possible than you can possibly imagine.” In the West, we are told our dreams can come true, if only we apply ourselves. There’s a rank positivism that breeds amnesia. It originated in Calvinist America, only to cross over first via Blair and then via Berlusconi with differing degrees of success. Slavs are interested in failure, what it exposes, the pressure and accountability that it breeds. Dreaming is about process more than result. It is the path of thought turned into a line of flight, an escape *from* something more than the procurement of something, the fantasy more than the speculation of a job, the reverie of a pay raise, or the hope of a score.

### **Now and Never**

Until very recently, Slavs would spend countless years in higher education to learn the way around a world that was hitherto forbidden to them. Leaving the country was strictly forbidden, speaking to foreigners would arouse suspicion from the authorities. Languages were an abstract area of study. So it is that Slavs are very well educated . . . but with no endgame in mind. As a child reared in an unprecedentedly prosperous West, it is difficult not to look fondly on a recent past when education was considered threatening by the powers that be and foreign languages were considered as useful as astrology.

### **Long Live Long Live! Death to Death to!**

#### **H. Anvari**

Slavs either drink to get absolutely hammered or do not drink at all. It is an honest restitution of alcohol to its proper place, as a vehicle for

intoxication. If the West sips, the East absorbs. Where the West consumes, keeping the alcohol at a safe distance, the East devours and has trouble keeping it at arm's length. Slavs look dumbfounded at people imbibing at cocktail parties. The casualness is disheartening. Are the umbrellas, the straws, the mixers, the improbable names all a sideshow to distract from the main billing? Slavs sit around a table, tête-à-tête, and each shot is performed in a ritual of increased intimacy. We commemorate alcohol. In fact, we Slavs have a weakness for commemoration. We like to mark the passing of every tea, every meal, every letter, every conversation, every instant, as if it could be our last. In his *L'Abécédaire*, Deleuze asks: If food is such a wonderful thing, how come we find it unbearable to eat alone? How come we need a conversation or company to go with a meal? Deleuze, like the Slavs, did things excessively (alcohol being one of them) or did not do them at all.

In popular culture, much has been made of this all-or-nothing approach to life. It's been touted as a particularly facile genre of

radicalism. Too often, it's an affectation, and one that trades on a destructive or unhealthy cachet. Let it be known that Slavs are not punks. Life is hard-edged enough not to resort to the donning of dark clothes, dark makeup, and dark hair all by light-skinned people. With no need for faux extreme genres or real extreme sports, Slavs live the wildly dizzying swings from one extreme to another as the natural course of events. The day-before-yesterday Nazism, yesterday communism, and today capitalism. It's enough to make anyone's head spin.

We want language to be equally affective and analytical, but our aspirations are, from the outset, weathered by a sense of defeatism, rupture, or equivocation best described by Antoine Compagnon in his book *Les Antimodernes* (2005). That is, we know we will likely fail but suspend disbelief and try our damndest to succeed nonetheless.

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## History of Art History in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe: The Post-National in East European Art, from Socialist Internationalism to Transnational Communities

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MAJA FOWKES AND REUBEN FOWKES

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With integration into the globalised art world, the ever-elusive notion of contemporary East European art is today becoming increasingly intangible and diverse. The changed circumstances are reflected in the East European art scene, which now includes artists who are not necessarily based in their native countries but may still work with the legacy of shared histories and experiences; artists living in the region but working internationally without the burden of their own sociopolitical past; as well as non-native artists, either in collectives or individually, who have settled in the capitals of the former Eastern bloc or simply chosen Eastern Europe as the focus of their artistic research. Indicative of the current situation is the fact that artists from Eastern Europe regularly

feature in major biennials, are represented as a matter of course by leading international galleries, can be selected for prestigious art prizes, and generally merge with the artistic multitude living precariously in transnational communities around the globe.

The transition undergone by East European art has also been reflected in the preoccupations of contemporary artists. Arguably a distinction can be made between the first post-communist decade, when artists were frequently drawn to explore the grand narratives of memory, trauma, and collective identities of the socialist past, and the situation in more recent years, in which artistic involvement with the politics of identity has diversified into new concerns, which are often characterised by a sense of

cosmopolitan solidarity. This paper explores the specific trajectory of globalisation in Eastern Europe where some traditions of socialist internationalism are more deeply embedded than the widespread and much discussed ideas of post-colonialist multiculturalism.

From today's perspective, which can also be characterised as the era of "post-transition,"<sup>1</sup> due to the fact that, on the one hand, many of the political goals of the transition have been achieved, while on the other, belief in the utopian promise of transition has given way to a more cynical assessment of economic and social reality in a globalised Eastern Europe, there has been a distinct shift in artistic interests. Symptomatically, while in 1993 Dan Perjovschi had the word "Romania" tattooed on his arm in a performance that affirmed both his national and East European identity, in 2003 he decided to take back this act of identification by having the tattoo removed. His action also pointed to the submersion of national identity, its dispersal within a globalised cultural field in which multiple and fluid forms of belonging coexist. Commenting on the process of tattoo removal using medical lasers, the artist states: "ROMANIA didn't disappear from my body, it only spread itself so as it is no longer visible."<sup>2</sup> This overcoming of crude national identity and the shift towards a more post-national sensitivity should not be understood in opposition to national identity, but rather as leading to more complex and multilayered forms of belonging.

According to Jürgen Habermas, the possibility for the post-national is to be found in the emergence of a "cosmopolitan solidarity" that goes "beyond the affective ties of nation, language, place and heritage."<sup>3</sup> Cosmopolitan solidarity, much like the processes of globalisation, need not be seen as a single phenomenon, but rather takes on different manifestations in particular contexts. In Eastern Europe, such new forms of solidarity that go beyond the logic of the nation, while perhaps still primarily attributable to powerful tendencies within globalisation, also have an important prehistory in the influence of the concept and experience of socialist internationalism.

Socialist internationalism can be approached as a category in socialist thought that found its

most famous and emphatic expression in the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, "Workers of the world unite!," and was based on the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, with the ultimate aim of creating a world socialist community. It can also be viewed as an element of the historical experience of the working-class movements, in which the theory of proletarian solidarity was transformed in practice into a tool of Soviet domination, and more generally overshadowed by the assertion of statist nationalism. In the context of the post-Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe, socialist internationalism also extended to practical support for anti-colonial struggles in the Third World and a general sympathy for anti-capitalist and popular revolutionary movements around the globe. The legacy of socialist internationalism, which is associated with the creation of "cross-national, global or non-territorial solidarities, communities and organisations of an egalitarian and democratic nature,"<sup>4</sup> has the potential to contribute to the development of new forms of global solidarity, based on sympathies that go beyond national limits and narrow economic self-interest, and which incorporate the contemporary values of diversity, peace, and ecology.

Sensitivity for international solidarity can be located in the work of many East European artists, including prominent members of the neo-avant-garde. Tamás St.Auby's *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* (1969) arose as the artist's response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, with the artist empathising with the situation facing the people of Prague and expressing admiration for the spirit of resistance represented by the practice of carrying a brick wrapped in newspaper to protest against the crackdown on independent radio stations by the Soviets. An additional irony is that the artist's gesture of genuine solidarity was in stark contrast with the Soviet justification for the invasion on the grounds of defending proletarian internationalism against nationalist deviations. Hungarian conceptual artist Gábor Attalai's contribution to the 1972 publication *Aktuelle Kunst in OstEuropa* was also very much in the egalitarian spirit of socialist internationalism, and was a significant choice for the first Western study on conceptual art in Eastern Europe. He wrote: "My best friends are farmers, pilots, engine drivers, road sweepers, hairdressers, meteorologists, mathematicians,

1 — Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, "From Post-Communism to Post-Transition," *The Art Book*, vol. 16, no. 1 (February 2009): 57–58.

2 — Dan Perjovschi, quoted on artist's website: [www.perjovschi.ro](http://www.perjovschi.ro).

3 — Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, xiv.

4 — Peter Waterman, *Globalisation, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms*, Mansell, Washington, D.C., 1998, 50.

postmen, chemists and numerous others,”<sup>5</sup> a statement which reminds us of the socialist ideal of a classless society.

Internationalism in Eastern Europe was not just a matter of party policy, Marxist theory, or an existentialist decision, but rather reflected the effect of the conditions of “real existing socialism” on individual circumstances. The spread of an internationalist outlook in artistic circles was to a large extent the result of personal connections made through travel and the existence of informal networks across the Eastern bloc. Participation in exhibitions and art gatherings in other socialist countries at a time when travel to the West was difficult or impossible was an opportunity for cross-border friendships and professional relationships to arise, creating sympathies and communities of artistic interests that went beyond the national context.<sup>6</sup> The observation that the conceptualism of the late ’60s and early ’70s can be considered the first global art movement has a particular meaning in the setting of socialist Eastern Europe, where the creation of informal East-East networks grounded in feelings of solidarity, rather than market-oriented competition, was an important factor in the creation of a specific international alignment among East European neo-avant-garde artists.

Another factor that contributed to the internationalist orientation of East European art, although not necessarily in a socialist direction, was the phenomenon of emigration. There was no return for political exiles, a situation which both gave rise to what Edward Said distinctively described as the sadness of exile and gave rise to complicated identities and divided loyalties for those who had to leave and find new homes.<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon of exile created complications also for nationally based art histories in the region, which often found it hard to evaluate the work of artists who left their home country mid-career or to position them within the local art canon. One of the preoccupations of new museums of contemporary art in the region in recent years has been to reassess the careers of artists who emigrated during the communist period, which involves negotiation of the gap between international and local reputations.

During the first post-communist decade, internationalism was to a certain extent eclipsed by the rediscovery of national and ethnic identity, which also found its expression in contemporary art. At the same time, although the post-modernism of the 1990s was in general preoccupied with questions of identity, be it of nation, gender, or minority, the rise of identity politics in Eastern Europe was also driven by the wish to reconnect with the cultures of neighbouring countries, knowledge of which had been obscured or distorted by the borders erected during the era of state socialism. Identity politics was manifested in a post-modern attitude towards the strategic construction of regional identities, and lay behind the popularisation of categories such as East European art, Baltic art, and Balkan art. Paradigmatic of the intertwining of national and East European identities in this period is Kai Kaljo’s film *A Loser*, in which the artist herself stands in front of the camera and makes revealing statements such as “I am an Estonian artist” and “I earn \$90 a month,” followed by a burst of canned laughter, pointing to the predicament facing artists following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The discovery, or even manufacture, of East European identity in the 1990s was interpreted by many art theorists from the region as a manifestation of Western multiculturalism, the seemingly tolerant and liberal good intentions which were viewed as a smokescreen for a wave of cultural neocolonialism. A persuasive articulation of this position came from the Slovenian curator and theorist Igor Zabel, who reflected on the implicit demand that East European artists create work that confirms their identity and origins. He writes: “An Eastern artist now becomes attractive for the West not as somebody producing universal art, but exactly as somebody who reflects his particular condition. He’s not only an artist, but particularly a Russian, Polish or Slovene, or simply an Eastern [European] artist.”<sup>8</sup> With the end of the Cold War, the interest of the West was no longer in establishing the East through ideological and political differences, but rather through “cultural and civilisational differences.”<sup>9</sup> In a “world marked by otherness,”<sup>10</sup> in which difference was

5 — Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, “Planetary Forecast: The Roots of Sustainability in the Radical Art of the 1970s,” *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 9 (September 2009): 672.

6 — SocialEast seminar “Networks and Sociability in East European Art,” Courtauld Institute, London, 23 October 2010, [www.social-east.org](http://www.social-east.org).

7 — Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Granta Books, London, 2000.

8 — Igor Zabel, “Dialogue,” in Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszył (eds.), *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002, 360.

9 — Ibid.

10 — Igor Zabel, “We and the Others,” in David Elliott and Bojana Pejić (eds.), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, exhibition catalogue, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1999, 110.



loudly celebrated, one particular “other” had a special status, that of the West, which reserved the position of guardian of modern universal values. In his text for the exhibition *After the Wall* (1999), Zabel approvingly quotes Rasheed Araeen’s description of the West’s use of multiculturalism as a “cultural tool to ethnicise its non-white population in order to administer and control its aspiration for equality,” which for Zabel, “corresponds almost literally to the problem of the representational role of Eastern artists.”<sup>11</sup> Multiculturalism reveals itself, in this interpretation, as inseparable from the construction of the post-colonial other, who is allowed to express herself only so long as she speaks of her own otherness.

In recent years the further development of globalisation has moved the debate, which in terms of East European art was fixated on the binary division between East and West, into new conceptual territory. As Slavoj Žižek has identified, two contradictory processes can be observed in globalisation: on the one hand, the West uses globalisation as a form of colonialism, while at the same time, global capitalism as a completely de-localised system also colonises the whole world, including the West.<sup>12</sup> While in the 1990s it sometimes seemed as if with the end of the Cold War only the East had disappeared, this further phase of globalisation has created critical distance between the notion of the global and the West, so that it is increasingly tempting to talk about the “former” West as well as the former East.

Attempts to resist the implications of this process for the presumed stable category of the West, or in this context the Western art canon, have included insisting on the persistence of spatial hierarchies within the supposedly level playing field of globalisation, with the idea that the West colonises itself in the same way as it does other countries dismissed as an “alibi,” or another smokescreen for the continued dominance of the Western model posing as the universal. However, the logic of globalisation and its effect on previously stable art-historical divisions is increasingly hard to ignore. Among the most persuasive articulations of the dismantling of the universalist Western art-historical model comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from the field of contemporary art. Curator and theorist Okwui Enwezor pertinently describes a

situation in which the off-centre principal dominates, and the art world increasingly organised around structures that are “multi-focal, multi-local, hetero-temporal and dispersed,” articulated as a “refusal of the monolithic and rebellion against mono-culturalism.”<sup>13</sup>

Enwezor’s assertion that globalisation has brought about a “de-centring” and “dispersal” of the universal, and a “breakdown of cultural or locational hierarchy,” would appear to spell the end of the Western dominance of the art historical canon, with similar implications for national art-historical narratives. Whereas in the 1990s globalisation was often perceived as something foreign, coming from somewhere else, provoking a desire to defend national culture against economic colonisation, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the changes in living patterns brought by the internet, mobile phones, and cheaper air travel mean that for many, including participants in the art world, instant communication is always available, and there’s no longer any need to wait for a message of endorsement from the West before launching a debate.

East European art is certainly no longer in the situation of the Cold War era, when, as art historian László Beke states, even communication between East European countries happened via the West.<sup>14</sup> Today there are practically no limits to the opportunities available to East European artists to take part on an equal footing with artists from elsewhere in the contemporary art world, nor any theoretical obstacles to East European art historians contributing to the formation of new globalised art-historical narratives that have cut loose from the constraints of the old familiar Western universalist model. Symptomatic perhaps of this new situation are publications such as Miško Šuvaković’s recent book on conceptual art, which was published in Novi Sad, and which makes no distinction in its organisation or coverage between the conceptual art of East and West, with no noticeable difference in the author’s approach to writing about representatives of the Western canon, such as Art & Language, and groups from Eastern Europe, such as OHO.<sup>15</sup> It seems that the complexes about East and

13 — Okwui Enwezor, “Modernity and Post-Colonial Ambivalence,” in Nicholas Bourriaud (ed.), *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, exhibition catalogue, Tate, London, 2009, 31.

14 — László Beke, “Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art,” in Jan Farver (ed.), *Global Conceptualism*, exhibition catalogue, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999, 43.

15 — Miško Šuvaković, *Konceptualno umjetnost (Conceptual Art)*, Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 2007.

11 — Ibid., 112.

12 — Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 225 (September/October 1997): 28–51.

West, the passion and recriminations, which so dominated the art discourse of the 1990s, have finally been surpassed. The field is now open for both artists and art historians to interfere with the code, since—in difference to the situation during the era of modernism—the globalised meta-language of art is not owned by the West anymore.

When Roman Ondak was selected for the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennial, he was aware of the politics of the only post-socialist pavilion that has managed to bridge a geopolitical divide by sharing the space between two now independent countries. He designed an environment entitled *Loop* in which he brought the garden setting surrounding the pavilion into the building, literally reflecting the scenery of trees and shrubs in the vicinity to create a looped reality accessed along a gravel path that passes seamlessly through the building. Through this installation, the artist avoided the apparent demands of national representation, as he states: “I’m representing Slovakia in the Czechoslovak Pavilion. But, by doing this work, I don’t feel I’m representing the country . . . it seems as if I’m not here, and my work is not here. I’m playing with the disappearance of the pavilion as it merges into its surroundings.” He continues, “I’m in the pavilion, and I’m not completely erasing my nationality, but this is suppressed by the way I participate.”<sup>16</sup>

From the clear disengagement from the politics of national representation of the work itself and the artist’s avoidance of the simplicity of national identity, the disavowal of the automatic primacy of the national frame is evident. In other words, the Slovak artist representing Slovakia in the competitive national arena of the Giardini succeeds in what Gayatri Spivak has called “setting limits to mere identitarianism” by refusing to produce “a naturalized, homogenous identity.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, by replanting the shrubs after the biennial closed, the artist gave the pavilion “the smallest possible environmental footprint” and drew attention to the common situation after the end of each biennial, when the Giardini is filled with waste and discarded materials left over from the exhibition installations. The reference to ecological concerns, which necessarily exceed national boundaries and require global collaboration, is another aspect of Ondak’s pavilion

that points to an interest in emerging forms of post-national solidarity.

The synchronicity of global cultures and the rapid speed of information exchange reinforces another key aspect of globalisation with ramifications for East European art, that of the emergence of new forms of migration. This phenomenon is frequently discussed in an art context in terms of exiles and nomads, and often gives rise to cynicism about the claims for a “utopian nomadism” reserved for the economically privileged.<sup>18</sup> Spivak for example contrasts the “cosmopolitanism of the global elite and the passive exposure to multi-nationality in the everyday of the global underclass.”<sup>19</sup> However, the position of the majority of artists, whether they choose to settle in Prague, Berlin, or New York, should perhaps be discussed in terms not of privilege but of the shared *precarité* of unstable and insecure work and living conditions that have become more and more dominant in our “flexible” society.

The cosmopolitanism of the twenty-first century results as much from practical changes in peoples’ lives, brought by developments such as new patterns of migration, the spread of transnational communities, and the communicative possibilities of information technology, as it does from the emergence of new global sympathies and concerns around issues such as poverty, anti-war movements, and ecology. As one theorist of the post-national puts it, “cosmopolitanism doesn’t begin and end with a love of all humanity, but with modest, small scale and undeliberate personal networking.”<sup>20</sup> Cosmopolitanism, which until recently was practically an insult in Marxist parlance, is no longer automatically assumed to be a shallow or artificial form of identity, but can be conceived in more substantial terms as “rooted” or “experiential” cosmopolitanism. A recent publication dealing with the cosmopolitan imagination in an art context discusses a kind of cosmopolitanism that is “grounded, materially specific, and relational,” deals with “cultural diversity and movement beyond fixed geo-political borders,” and is “premised upon an embodied, embedded, generous, and affective form of subjectivity.”<sup>21</sup>

18 — T. J. Demos, “The Ends of Exile: Towards a Coming Universality,” in Bourriaud (ed.), *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, 73–88.

19 — Spivak, *Other Asias*, 237.

20 — Ulj Hannerz, “Where We Are and Who We Want to Be,” in Ulf Hedetoft and Hjørte Mette (eds.), *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 231.

21 — Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*, Routledge, London, 2010, 19.

16 — “Roman Ondak discusses the Czech/Slovak Pavilion,” [www.artforum.com](http://www.artforum.com) (2009).

17 — Gayatri Spivak, *Other Asias*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2008, 9.

It should be emphasised that migration is also happening on the territory of Eastern Europe, where minorities are still discussed in terms of ethnicity, and where the existence of transcultural communities is rarely acknowledged. Recently, an exhibition of foreign artists who have settled in Budapest since 1989 problematised the issue of how to accommodate their work within the nationally oriented art-historical narratives of the post-socialist countries.<sup>22</sup> Equally, Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska used an artist's residency in Hungary to produce a video work that dealt directly with the increasingly multinational and diverse reality of contemporary Eastern Europe and the difficulty of accommodating a historically novel situation within a nationally oriented social and political order. The film juxtaposes documentation of an extremist right-wing group marching on Budapest's Heroes' Square and footage of an unlikely group of people (foreigners living in Budapest from Syria, Mongolia, Nigeria, Bulgaria, Russia, Serbia, Great Britain, and China, along with two gay people, a Jew, and two Hungarian extreme nationalists) taking a queasy flight on an old Soviet plane along the Danube Bend. The rather old and unstable plane serves for the artist as a symbol of Hungary itself, and *Airways* (2008) makes us aware of the fragility of the social and

political situation, and how easily things could get out of hand.<sup>23</sup>

Like the art created under its name, the notion of Eastern Europe has itself migrated over the last two decades, losing political relevance as the original geopolitical designation of the Eastern bloc fades into history. The transformations brought by the entry of even ex-Soviet republics into the European Union and NATO has emptied the old term "Eastern Europe" of its contested political significance, but perhaps made it a more open and productive category in other ways. Eastern Europe, which is no longer defined by Soviet control, but only by a differentiated historical experience of socialism, remains less loaded than the many associated subterms, such as Balkan art, Baltic art, or even East Central European art, all of which imply geographical exclusions. This liberated concept of Eastern Europe may offer artists a context in which to deal with both major themes associated with the broad heritage of communism and the social and political dilemmas of post-communism, as well as providing a less ideological space in which to explore singular memories, local particularities, and global issues of post-national solidarity.

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22 — Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, *Revolutionary Decadence: Foreign Artists in Budapest since 1989*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Kiscell, Budapest, 2009.

23 — See the artist's website, [www.rajkowska.com](http://www.rajkowska.com).

## The Emergence of "Eastern Europe": Cosmin Costinaș and Ekaterina Degot in Conversation

**COSMIN COSTINAȘ:** What does the notion of Eastern Europe mean for your worldview and your current practice?

**EKATERINA DEGOT:** The reason we're having this conversation is that the two of us have something in common: we deserted the field of "Eastern Europe" entirely, or at least to some extent. You are working in Hong Kong, and I am working in Cologne, which is very West; by the same token, however, the name of my institution, the Academy of the Arts of the World, is a

euphemism for non-Western art. It consists largely of a nomadic festival and an exhibition space where we carry out projects dealing with non-Western practices questioning the West. There is a question I have to answer all the time on both a practical and theoretical level: How does Eastern Europe fit into this? Is it Western, or non-Western, or not Western enough? The main narrative I am dealing with is institutional multiculturalism in Germany, which tends to ascribe ethnicity to everything and to reduce social and economic problems to blood identity.

Only this alleged authenticity grants the right to be represented. Eastern Europe is expected to provide a variety of those authenticities. For me, however, Eastern Europe is an alternative to this mono-ethnic approach, and especially to cultural fundamentalism, since it represents complex imagined communities, be it the remains of the Habsburg Empire, the remains of a buried Ashkenazic presence in Europe, or a post-war, non-market-driven society. In any case, it represents resistance to mono-identities and provides an opportunity to think in a non-nationalistic and non-ethnic way—also outside any religious framework, which is rather unpopular nowadays. How do you see Eastern Europe from the perspective of Hong Kong?

**CC:** To a certain extent I also use the notion of Eastern Europe, not as an instrument of resistance, but more as an operative notion and as a case study for a particular type of change and evolving understanding both of geography and time. It is sometimes suggested that the marker of Eastern Europe has been dislocated over the last ten years by a global paradigm. In my view, it would be more helpful to see this in a slightly different relational arrangement, where after the end of the Cold War, a new global paradigm was ushered in, one that was itself creating regional markers. Eastern Europe should thus be seen as the creation of a global perspective on contemporary art, rather than a precursor to a global era that took its place. Every region constitutes a building block in the global art world (except perhaps the USA and the former European colonial powers that are not yet fully marked as regions or provinces). It is true that there has been a process of dislocation and of profound change over the last ten years, but this might have more to do with phenomena within this process of composing a global narrative that was already in motion from the early 1980s onward. When the forming of the global art world began after the Cold War, Eastern Europe entered the scene immediately as Eastern Europe, as did Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America (though building on—or perhaps in this case actually dislocating—previous narratives from within it and about it), or sub-Saharan Africa. In this respect, the 1990s was a time of negotiating terminology, borders and their scope—how should these markers be called, where did they begin and end, and ultimately what should they do? But these were processes developing alongside and in direct relation to global expansion, rather than one dislocating the other.

There is another paradox here: While the global system of contemporary art claims for itself the ability of universal translation between contexts, this is, in fact, not particularly accurate. The global system of contemporary art is constituted by a complex array of vocabularies and institutions, both concrete and abstract, such as the new institution of the curator or the new version of the institution of the artist, prescribing how artists should behave and manage themselves in this new set of relations. This system, which has replicated itself on a global scale over decades, creates certain specificities, in a culturalist way, by always creating local stories, narratives describing what the local context should be like politically and culturally, also from an “identitarian” as well as an art-historical point of view. Contemporary art constructs a certain type of genealogy for itself in almost every context; there is almost always a place for a certain type of modernist figure that needs to be named or sometimes invented, for a figure of the neo-avant-garde and so on. Different art-historical moments that have had a different sense of their own historicity and a different geographical projection are being appropriated and integrated in the local or regional narratives of the global contemporary art system.

**ED:** But has Eastern Europe already taken its place in this globalized art world? Or is there a place reserved for it?

**CC:** I would say that almost all the notable agents of influence, forums, and institutions are taking it into account. Whether all the international collections have actually developed in the direction of integrating Eastern European art in a broad, deep, and nuanced way, and whether this process is happening in a meaningful way, is a whole other question.

**ED:** I have to add that I see art from Eastern Europe in contexts I didn’t see ten years ago, for example at the São Paulo Biennial in 2014, where considerable, central space was devoted to Edward Krasiński with two enormous complexes of work on display. The curators wanted to tell us something with that, because the biennial included very few historical works. So it was quite a gesture to give such exposure to an artist from Eastern Europe, which was more or less unconnected with the rest of the material there that was focused more on regional themes.

**CC:** We can also think of Documenta 12—which included quite a number of artists from Eastern Europe—as a turning point. The artists were

integrated in a way that acknowledged the histories that were reconstructed through these inclusions, and which was very nuanced in the different positions of each of these artistic figures. Many of them have had practices spanning many decades employing very different artistic languages and with different political allegiances. This was reflected in the exhibition. I can also think, more recently, of the last Gwangju Biennial, which had a very different strategy, trying very imaginatively to create counter-narratives to the issues of gender, the body, and relations of power in the Korean context. It seamlessly included many figures from Eastern European art. The exhibition was not about positing Eastern Europe as a category that needed to be rewritten. It was more an example of a certain dialogue, going beyond the first level that simply acknowledged the existence of an interesting region of Eastern Europe.

**ED:** How is the “East” related to the “Global South” or, for example, Greece in its present economic situation?

**CC:** Obviously the situation in Greece or Ukraine should urgently move us to reconsider the sense of Eastern Europe as the exception that has defined the first two decades of the post-communist transition, when Eastern Europe saw itself as Europe between brackets par excellence. Also, the eastern borders of Eastern Europe are now more firmly entrenched than ever they were, or at least clearer now because there have always been nuances and spaces of aspiration and potential, hybridity and ambiguity. Many ambiguities at the borders of Europe have been clarified now. The ambiguities have not disappeared though; they have moved, stronger and clearer, to the core of Europe.

**ED:** Overall, it is important to resist the culturalization and “othering” of Eastern Europe. It is very pleasant to dwell in and delve into Eastern European irony and sense of humor as some sort of soft Otherness, but it only serves to camouflage the fact that politically, Eastern Europe also gravitates towards right-wing nationalism. If we are talking about political reality, we see very different vectors. As cultural producers, museum people, or even as collectors, we are interested in keeping the specificity of Eastern Europe in order to speak about it and analyze it. At the same time, politics can work against this with the desire to blend with the West, or to subvert this longing for specificity in fundamentalism. How do you view this contradiction?

**CC:** The most important division in Europe now seems to be the culturalized North, which is the tax-paying, neoliberalist (of a nativist social-democratic persuasion), and hard-working, as opposed to its counter-stereotype. Eastern Europe appears eager to be counted in or among this cultural North. This North plus East versus South division is now far more acute than any hangovers of the West versus East discussions, even if it ignores the full economic and social picture, the (still) substantial income disparities between the former communist bloc and most of the rest of Europe, or to a certain extent the lingering institutional differences.

**ED:** What is also important concerning the general notion of Europe is the current Russian and Ukrainian debate on Europeanism. This noble notion is alarmingly acquiring explicitly racist overtones, as a statement like “we are Europeans” is followed by “we are not those bloody Asians,” in other words culturally and socially backwards. For Russians, that would be Ukrainians; for Ukrainians, Eastern Ukrainians. Maybe it is important to keep “Eastern European-ness” not as an essentialist notion, but as something with which to question the essentialism of Europe.

**CC:** I would like to emphasize something I referred to before: the configuration of regions as a product of the post-Cold War era, and of the emergence of global contemporary art. We need to underline the position of Eastern Europe in this, because it was the first region par excellence, the first built-up unit in the global arena of contemporary art. The Eurocentric imagination around the end of the Cold War pointed to a phenomenon unfolding across Europe, when in fact it was really a global one. The emergence of Eastern Europe in global contemporary art has been a defining component for the last 25 years, and it can also be taken as a model when trying to understand other regions, their emergence and crises, when looking at the changes and ruptures of the past decades, and when trying to understand how different geographies were created. This is where Eastern Europe as an operative concept is still useful.

**ED:** I am very much annoyed when Eastern European identity is objectified and exoticized. It is more productive to perceive Eastern Europe as the subject of a gaze, the subject of a reading by the West and its allegedly universal cultural production in the first place, be it Hegelian philosophy, realist painting, or modernist art. This sort of second-hand self-colonized universalism that you also see in Asia or Latin America

is actually far more universal than the original. A cultural artifact aspires to be something, and you see the distance between the two, which some would call incompleteness or imperfection but which represents something I would call productive vulnerability. Coming back to art, do you think young artists from this region still consider themselves Eastern European, or is this notion disappearing?

**CC:** The issue is less clear-cut today than it used to be, and also differs from country to country. There is always a demand and a market, albeit a shrinking and more marginal one for a certain type of identity politics and self-exoticizing art practices. On the other end of the spectrum, there is an interesting intellectual production that still uses this notion, often in quite productive ways. Look at Romania and the leftist discourse there over the last five years. There, the notion of the East is still being discussed as a valid term. However, this is done from a new perspective that brings interesting points to the wider discussion(s) there. Despite all the exhaustion the term has experienced and the liberal connotations it has picked up, it is not irrelevant today when used in a thoughtful and critical way. This should also be the case in Ukraine, shouldn't it?

**ED:** In Ukraine, the notion of Eastern Europe would definitely be a construction, because officially it has not been part of Eastern Europe for 70 years, having instead been part of the Soviet Union. With Ukraine's very complex historical background, there is something to be rediscovered—but in a controversial way. To touch upon another interesting topic here: Why do you think it is conceptual art that has become the normative tradition of the Eastern European neo-avant-garde? In Russia, for instance, I would not have expected private institutions to support this particular kind of art in the first place. I had rather imagined that they would be interested in something more conservative. Meanwhile, the bonding between private interests and institutions and conceptual art has taken place everywhere.

**CC:** I guess this is a question of validation and of legitimacy. If we are talking about the new elites who are supporting this artistic language, these elites are in need of being recognized and being connected to the global elites whom they see as their peers. This language is immediately translatable and understandable for other power structures on a global level—so it is a very efficient fuel for fostering such connections. It would be more difficult to obtain this

recognition relying on various local artistic idiosyncrasies. As an example from Asia, the otherwise very conservative and nativist dictatorship of the Marcos family in the Philippines was very enthusiastic about supporting conceptual and neo-avant-garde practices in their country, as a badge of recognition in the modern club of U.S. allies.

**ED:** It also tells us how contemporary art opened up the way for neoliberal thinking, with its notion of immaterial production, something Alexander Alberro has described in relation to New York. There, conceptual artists were of course more directly related to advertising. In Eastern Europe they were not, but they were and have been dreaming about or playing out some of the metaphorical economic schemes and scenarios.

**CC:** Conceptualism in Eastern Europe often involves very narrative and lyrical practices employing conceptualist vocabularies. And indeed, it is often in strong solidarity with very conservative positions.

**ED:** Perhaps not in a classical sense, but there is a strong tradition of performance and participatory work in Eastern Europe. In my opinion this will go down in history as something extremely original. I recently saw that MoMA's permanent exhibition now shows Latin American abstract art from the 1950s and 1960s that entered the canon and was legitimized as an important part of a universal narrative only very recently. I am not sure whether Eastern European art has arrived at that point yet.

**CC:** There have been efforts at MoMA and other larger global museums to expand their geographies for various reasons. Discussing new geographies in my opinion is part of the mainstream at the moment. The bastions of the North Atlantic art scene are aware of this and are responding to it. There is a sense of connecting peripheral avant-gardes from Eastern Europe with the avant-gardes of Southeast Asia and Latin America. The question is, however, how nuanced this form of integration can be.

**ED:** Still, I see the international artistic landscape controlled by formalist narratives. Despite all the interest in political issues, interdisciplinarity, and so on, there is still a predominant formalist reading and still a lot of reticence to anti-formalist theory and attitude, which limits the space for understanding art from the former communist bloc. Still, Eastern European art also has to be put into and viewed from and within different contexts.

**CC:** By comparison, ten years ago in Hong Kong the local scene was very much lamenting their marginality amidst all the hype about China. Now that it has become an important center both commercially and institutionally for the Asian scene, Eastern Europe is perceived simply as an indistinguishable part of Europe. But looking at Eastern Europe from Hong Kong can perhaps help us define or speak of it from different perspectives, such as that part of Europe that did not participate in the

colonial project. This should not be uttered self-righteously and uncritically, but it would be an interesting contribution to the debates of years to come within the ever-expanding globalized (art) world.

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## Epistemological Gaps Between the Former Soviet East and the “Democratic” West

KETI CHUKHROV

### 1. The Traps of Transitioning to “Democracy”

The Soviet Union is considered to be a classic example of a disciplinary society, and we are used to regarding it as a backward social system in comparison to the post-disciplinary societies of liberal democracy.

What for the Western states took place as a gradual development towards post-disciplinary conditions after the Second World War became shock therapy for the former Soviet states after 1989. The entrance into the “civilized democratic world” had to be accomplished via measures that were often extreme and exceptional; these entailed monetizing the commonwealth, canceling social guarantees, imposing a forceful shift to a market economy, and permitting the spread of criminal businesses.

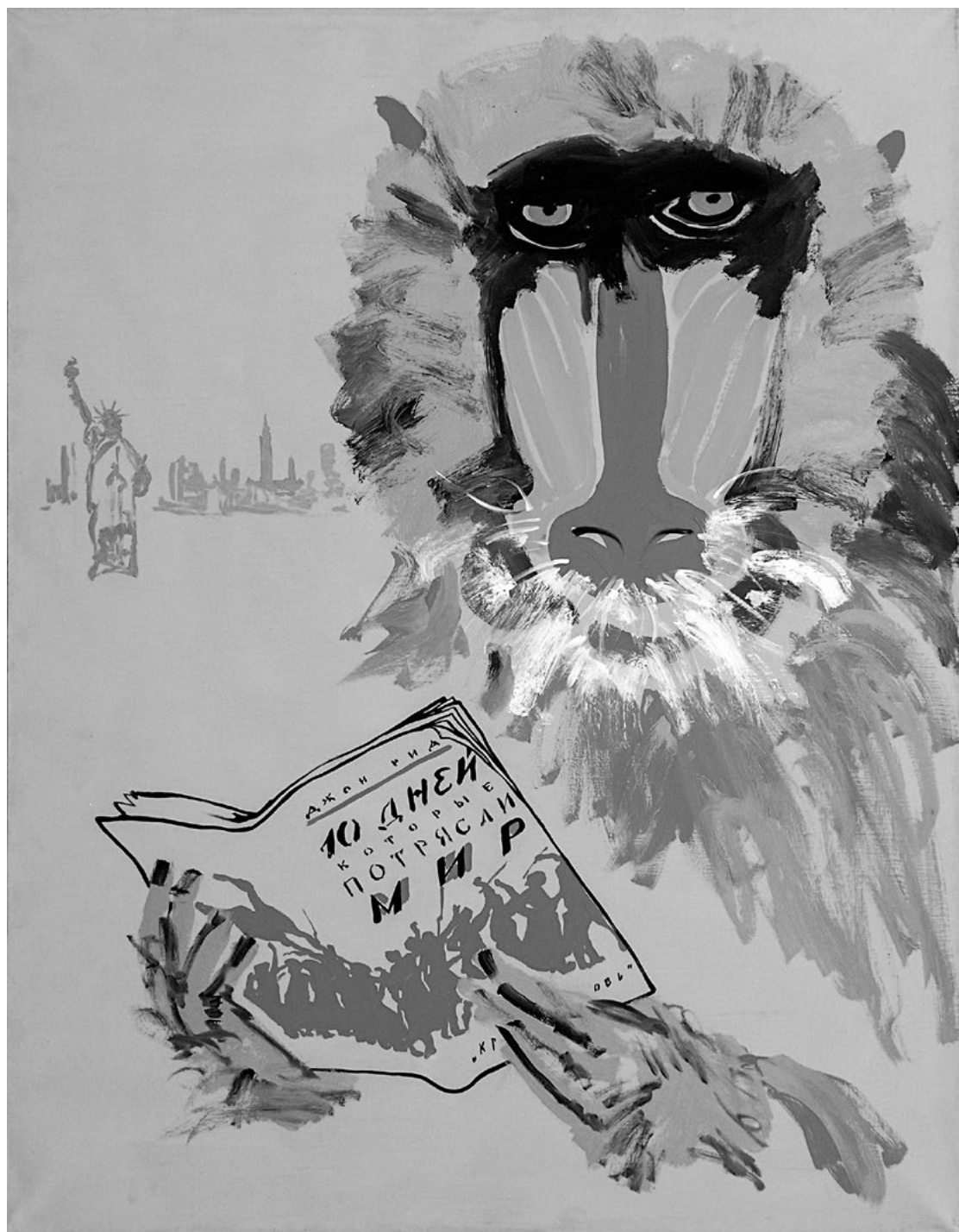
Such vicious features of the post-Soviet “transition to democracy” were often eradicated by severe and authoritarian measures; these measures were taken either in the name of integration into the world of “Western liberal democracy” (as was the case with Georgia during the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili), or (as was the case with Russia in the 2000s) they were taken to control and nationalize businesses whose complete economic freedom and social irresponsibility led to a drastic impoverishment of the population. Nevertheless, the early post-Soviet criminal economy, as well its eradication, were equally violent and hardly democratic; furthermore, they coincided with neoliberal shifts in Western governments. So the pursuit of Western social democracy in post-socialist states turned out to be somewhat

belated, since the social democracy programs in the Western neoliberal societies themselves shrank and became obsolete. Here one has to face the fact that, while promoting the social democratic agenda or the socially engaged legacies of avant-garde art in post-Soviet regions, Western non-governmental and cultural institutions claimed to export and disseminate something that they themselves were no longer able to practice or believe in.

As a result, the drive to become a transparent and modernized society manifests in the features of control and in the police state far more in post-Soviet societies than in Western democracies. It is for this reason that the memory of a disciplinary society with its shadowy back-drop might paradoxically seem more attractive and desirable for many. This is the reason why, since the late 1990s, the enlightened neoliberal technocracy in the West has had little effect on Russia’s paternalist oligarchy. Legalized, “civilized” capitalism seems far harsher than the domestic, corrupt clans of the post-Soviet economy. It would seem that some amount of corruption keeps things more “human,” less alienated—an apparent excuse for the rampant corruption that characterized the shadow economy of the Soviet and post-Soviet period.<sup>1</sup>

As Slavoj Žižek often repeats, autocratic systems presuppose the hidden perversion within society, while the permissiveness of

1 — That is probably the reason for the results of the recent elections in Georgia, with the pro-Kremlin oligarch taking over the former president’s team and the neoliberal technocrats defining their political program as pro-Western democratic modernization.



Dmitry Gutov. *Ten Days That Shook the World*. 2003. Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (90 × 70 cm). Courtesy the artist



post-disciplinary control—which allows for the open and democratic disclosure of perversions and the violations within them—is much more ruled and governed. Foucauldian research into neoliberal control societies has revealed how the transparent control society internalizes the exposure of perverse or subversive elements. Subversive and transgressive gestures or critical tactics are folded into the rhetoric and ideology of the liberal “open” society.

Interestingly, however, in post-Soviet societies, such subversive practices or the exposures of trauma are very rare. Even in the case of actions by the art-groups Voina or Pussy Riot, the result of intervention is quite different from Western art practices of subversion. The actions of Voina, in fact, reproduce the perversion inherent in Russian political power itself. Likewise, while Pussy Riot’s intervention at the Christ the Savior cathedral seems at first sight to be a classic gesture of violating the frames of established power and sanctity, it is rather the power itself here that is already more transgressive and perverse; the resistant practice rather reveals the power’s perversion by mimicking it—the fake and perverse way the government or clergy pray or stage their “chastity.” Hence, the members of the artistic group are thus socially and politically much less transgressive or subversive, since their claim is simply an appeal for democratic values, civil society, and transparent elections. Whereas the perverse “sovereign,” who established his illegal presidency almost as a state of exception, is indulging in his subversive manipulations of ruling.

This is why the question becomes: How can one subvert or transgress the force that represents a much stronger and more sacrilegious subversion? On the one hand, we know how often criticism has been prohibited in post-Soviet countries. But at the same time, these cases of prohibition on behalf of the State do not mean that the authority is against perversion or subversion, but rather that the authority itself must remain the principal source of such perverse acts. The Russian conceptual writer Vladimir Sorokin has shown well in his writings how the drive for perversion manifests itself in the behavior of an authoritarian and sovereign power. In this case, perversity and transgression have nothing to do with freedom and remain quite different from the post-Fordist Western treatment of the role of subversion.

This distinction suggests vastly different genealogies and epistemologies for notions of power, freedom, and the general (the common) in, on the one hand, post-socialist and former

socialist ethics and, on the other, Western liberal democracy or even Western post-Marxist theory.

## 2. The Grounds for Controversial Epistemologies

Post-socialist critical studies associate too many features of the former socialist societies with totalitarianism and its vices. The critique of modernism in Soviet aesthetics and the mistrust of psychoanalysis or post-structuralism are regarded as the result of prohibitions imposed on culture by the party or by Marxist-Leninist dogmas. But all those restrictions that we condemn in historical socialism have deeper roots; they do not stem simply from authoritarian limitations against freedom, but from different historical paradigms of emancipation that the socialist “East,” on the one hand, and the liberal capitalist “West,” on the other, adhered to.

I will dwell at least on a few of these epistemological differences. But before I do that, I would like to mention a discussion initiated by Boris Buden, who claims that the post-communist condition is over.<sup>2</sup> This claim is very important for the former socialist Eastern European countries to precipitate their integration into the united Europe, into what Buden calls “the only possible modernity” as against the erroneous “Eastern” socialist modernity. The Western modernity, being time rather than space—is able to sublimate all identities and even make all other discourses on modernity and emancipation appear local. Historical socialism in the case of such an approach—despite its discourses of equality, modernity, and universality—is regarded as the local and peripheral case of modernity.

Termination of the post-communist condition facilitates overcoming the endless political immaturity and not-yet-readiness for democracy for which the post-socialist regions are constantly blamed. According to Buden, via ending the post-communist narratives of transition, the East could at last stop catching up with the West, so that both—“East” and “West”—would find themselves in one temporal regime of historical development. But is not such a stance, despite criticizing the implicit colonialism of Western democracy, acknowledging it as the only paradigm of development, for the sake of which all the legacies and

2 — Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus (Zones of Transition: On the End of Postcommunism)* (Zürkamp, 2009).

experiences of historical socialism have to be sublated and made null and void?

As a result—from the point of view of both pro-Western quasi-democratic politics and leftist critique—the former Soviet states are obliged to completely reject their memories or practices of emancipation that were actively pursued in former Soviet societies, despite authoritarian policies of historical socialism. They are to be swept away on behalf of Western democratic governmental policies, but also on behalf of the Western critical and leftist micro-political practices.

This is due to the fact that historical socialism is predominantly associated with nothing more than Russian imperialism, with Stalinism and its command economy, with censorship in culture, repressive cultural politics, and so forth. Little attention is paid to the fact that numerous breakthroughs in science, culture, and education, or the discrete features of an unsegregated society, were concomitant with the nonprofit economy and with the ethical and political premises of socialism itself.

In the end, the imperative to install a post-Soviet amnesia in relation to historical socialism turns out to be neocolonial—on the part of Western governments but also on the part of the Western leftist, critical emancipatory discourse. Even more strangely, during the rise of postcolonial theory, the attitude of the West to its former colonies was much more permissive and less categorical, while in the post-socialist experience, cultures that were not completely identitarian were simultaneously labeled as a local identity and condemned for the ferocity of their universalism and idealism.

Such attitudes evacuate the post-Soviet states' social democratic agendas—both in the parliamentary system and the civic and intellectual sphere. If the Eastern European cultural and political framework was epistemologically quite close to the critical discourses of resistance in the Western 1960s, and could somehow reconstruct them in the mode of the post-1989 left-liberal agenda (as in the case of *Krytyka Polityczna* in Warsaw), the former Soviet states were detached from both the Western political and cultural practices of the 1960s and the emancipatory features of their own cultural legacy. This is why neoliberal “democrats” or nationalist-conservative elites turned out to be the main political agents in post-Soviet politics. In the meantime, the left agenda has been appropriated by party bureaucrats like Gennady Zyuganov in Russia, or has dispersed into smaller movements.

In such conditions, it becomes important to develop an analysis that evades both Cold War discourse and nostalgia for the socialist past. While Foucault's cultural archeology did this for Western European disciplinary societies, this kind of work—apart from certain sporadic efforts—has not fully addressed post-Soviet societies. Why is it necessary? Why can't we simply claim to be part of the global pro-Western democracy?

The reason is that the ethical differences between historical socialism and Western liberal democracy or even its critical emancipatory traditions arise from deeply different epistemological interpretations and treatments of crucial philosophical notions—such as consciousness, the unconscious, power, culture, the psyche, labor, culture, the idea, the ideal, the common, and others.<sup>3</sup>

There are concrete examples of how certain notions that appeared in Western philosophy were only accepted through one interpretation in the West, while the post-revolutionary socialist project took up another. For example, we all remember how socialist culture mistrusted the concept of the unconscious. With the emergence of psychoanalysis in Europe, it was never clear whether psychoanalysis studied the unconscious to tame it, to crystallize it via language, to enable the subject to analyze her/his own self and thus clarify its uncontrolled forces—as Thomas Mann believed—or, on the contrary, to access the non-rational realm of freedom.

Later studies in post-structuralism showed the unconscious to be synonymous with creative practices and their irrational backgrounds, as well as with political potentialities. The unconscious as a Freudian clinical category acquired its ontological grounds in Lacan's studies and came to stand for political and creative potency in works by Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Butler. Lyotard discovered the libidinal unconscious of the capitalist economy, marking the inevitable libidinal impact of creative production in the conditions of capitalism. For Deleuze, schizophrenia, desire, and the unconscious are also inherent to capitalist production, just as the unconscious can also develop machines of subversive resistance in an expanded field for creative productivity. And let us not forget the affirmative role of insanity

3 — Such epistemological incompatibility marks the gaps not only between historical socialism and Western democracy or Western leftist theory, it is also the kind of epistemological rupture that exists between Hegel and Deleuze, Badiou and Virno, Marx and Heidegger.

in Foucault's studies and the role of individual psychology in articulating the subversive potentiality of gender in Butler's theories.

Lacan's psychoanalysis declared that the unconscious was organized like a language, but could also enable a transgressive break beyond language, beyond power, beyond consciousness. In post-Marxist theory, the idea that language represses certain pre-linguistic incentives of collectivity became very important. In his book *Multitude*, for example, Paolo Virno criticizes the notion of language as the function of a rational apparatus hampering instinctive pre-linguistic, pre-individual, pre-conscious drives that can only generate utter collectivity and emancipation.<sup>4</sup> For him, these pre-individual drives initiating intersubjectivity, political emancipation, and artistic and performative innovation are beyond linguistic and cultural acquisition. They are produced in the neuro-physiological pre-rational sphere.

In Marxist Soviet philosophy, in works by Evald Ilyenkov, Lev Vygotsky, and Valentin Voloshinov,<sup>5</sup> the potential for freedom does not reside in the unconscious, but rather in consciousness, which can only enable an individual to connect with the general (the common). Freedom is not something acquired via subversive or contingent moves, but complements a will towards common labor. Ilyenkov, not unlike the post-structuralists, tries to reflect on what comes before and beyond language. For the post-structuralists, language happens to be a cultural order, a metaphysical structure, a restraint. For Soviet psychology and philosophy, on the contrary, what is placed before language is neither the unconscious nor the irrational, nor the archetypes or the instinctive, but human history, logic, thinking, and culture as potentialities of the generic and the ideal—impossible concepts for Western thinking of the 1960s and '70s.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Materialism of the Ideal and the General

Both psychoanalysis and post-structuralism locate the idea and the ideal in the superego, i.e., super-consciousness, claiming it as a metaphysical category, detached from empirical reality.

Therefore, when the unconscious becomes the embodiment of creativity and freedom, the categories of the general (the universal) and the ideal are automatically rejected as redundant for political as well as artistic creativity.

In socialist aesthetics and ethics, it is the contrary: the category of the ideal is not placed in the superego as some transcendental abstraction, but is part of everyday life, of communication, production, and intersubjectivity. In this case, there is no split between body and idea, since the ideal manifests itself via material externality and occupies the "body" and its empirical existence. Such an understanding of the ideal does not position it as something sublime or as superseding reality.

As a matter of fact, the material presence of the ideal in the everyday unites very different experiences of socialist culture: the classical avant-garde, early socialist realism, Soviet psychology, OBERIU practices, Andrei Platonov's literature, and the cinematography, philosophy, and literature of the 1960s and '70s. Materialness of the ideal refers to Hegelian and Marxist arguments about the conflation of a thing (matter) and the notion of surpassing the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. This stance of dialectical monism of body and mind was crucial in the onto-ethics of communism.

According to Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov, the teleology of the ideal and the general (the common) comes before language.<sup>7</sup> It precedes semiotic or linguistic realizations of thinking, culture, and history.<sup>8</sup> This refers to experiments of the psychologists Alexei Leontiev and Alexander Mesheriakov, who worked at an experimental school for deaf, blind, and mute children.<sup>9</sup> Their experiments

7 — In English translation, this notion of *vseobshee* (or, in German, *Allgemein*) is translated as "the Universal." However, "the general," or sometimes "the common," would fit the Russian notion of *vseobshee* (as well as Hegel's *Allgemein*) better.

8 — The difference with Virno here is that Virno, while locating the common in the sphere of neurophysiology and reflexes (as the pre-linguistic and pre-rational category) interprets it in favor of pre-rational, pre-cultural physiological and instinctual contingency, while for Ilyenkov, the pre-linguistic realm can be symbolic and ideal.

9 — Alexei Nikolaevich Leontiev, Soviet psychologist (1903–1979), disciple of A. Luria and L. Vygotsky. Author of the books *On the Consciousness of Learning* (1947), *Intellectual Development of a Child* (1950), *Activity, Consciousness, Person* (1977), and *Will* (1978). Alexander Ivanovich Mesheriakov, Soviet psychologist (1923–1974), disciple of A. Luria and I. Sokoliansky. In 1960, he founded a laboratory for the research of teaching methods for the deaf, blind, and mute children at the Institute of Defectology in the Academy of Sciences, and in 1963 opened a school for deaf, blind, and mute children in Zagorsk. He is the author of *The Image in the Psyche of a Blind and Deaf Child* (1960), *Psychic Development in the Conditions of Sensory Defects* (1965), and *The Dimension of Probability in the Signal Perception of Deaf and Blind Children* (1970).

4 — Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* (Semiotext(e), 2008), 169–189.

5 — Evald Ilyenkov, Soviet-Russian philosopher (1924–1979). He used Marxist theory to develop materialist interpretations of Hegel. See English translations at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/index.htm>. Among his works are "Dialectics of the Ideal" (ca. 1960), *Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete* (1960), and *The Universal* (1974).

6 — Evald Ilyenkov, "Dialectics of the Ideal," in *Philosophy and Culture* (Political Literature, 1991), 229–270, esp. 262–267.

enabled Ilyenkov to claim that even with very limited capacities for speech or visual perception (since these children could only rely on tactile senses and muscular reflexes), it is possible to develop not only capacities for survival but the experience of the worldly, the generic. This means that pre-linguistic human motor functions can comprise the teleology of the common and the general even before an individual masters speech and language. And these pre-linguistic functions are not at all confined to reflexes and psychic operations.

The stereotypical post-World War II interpretations of idealism consider the ideal as transcendental individual consciousness, as the inward form of the “I.” It resides within immaterial speculative concepts, while the external world has to do with material objects. That’s why the ideal is understood as the subjective and speculative idea of a thing or of a world in one’s head.

But, following Marx, Ilyenkov claims something quite different. He dialectically connects thinking, consciousness, and external material reality. The ideal is not an imaginary, speculative category, since it exists and functions as the objectified form of human activity, becoming the things of the outer world due to labor. The ideal is generated neither psychically, nor in the individual consciousness, but in the outer world, and is created historically via collective human labor, its commons.<sup>10</sup>

The ideal is merely the reflection of objective reality in human activity and its transformation by human activity. For example, material culture and its history are nominally material, but insofar as they exceed their nominal status and are common and general, they are also ideal, while also being a material “body.”<sup>11</sup>

Another motivation to claim the concept of the ideal in Soviet philosophy was the teleology of labor and human activity in general. In discussing teleology—which is often erroneously identified with totality or holism—Ilyenkov uses the following example: a building cannot be

reduced to its constituent bricks or material elements. A building is its material, concrete, and other empirical elements, but it would be impossible without pre-empirical projection.<sup>12</sup> This pre-empirical, teleological element is always there in the objects produced by labor, as well as labor actions. Labor is teleological because it presupposes the projection of a thing to be produced, and this is what makes it ideal.<sup>13</sup> The ideal is the image of bread in the head of a baker or a hungry person.<sup>14</sup> This is similar to Marx’s statement that even the worst architect, as opposed to the bee, first builds the hive in the head.

Thus the dimension of the ideal implies merely the acknowledgement of the fact that human existence is not confined to biological morphology: it evolves via labor, and labor in its own turn—when it is not alienated—is biased by commons synchronically, as well as diachronically. So the newly born human being enters the world of social human life with her/his unformed consciousness and only acquires consciousness in interrelation with the outer world of history, culture, society, and labor (not the other way round). Thus, the world of objects produced by a human for humans via labor—i.e., objectified forms of human activity, which is culture, and not just the natural forms or genetic inheritance—generate human consciousness and human will in general—hence in ideal—terms. From this standpoint, one recognizes Marx’s famous statement that the social being defines consciousness. Therefore, the general (the ideal) even precedes language and its functions.

The notion of the general often suggests the analogous, similar features of the many, but can also be seen as a primary resource from which different branches stem, not unlike the notion of the universal. It can also be the nominal sum of something or somebody—an individual, for instance. In civil rights, the general is often understood this way, as the common.<sup>15</sup>

12 — Evald Ilyenkov, “On the General,” in *Philosophy and Culture* (Political Literature, 1991), 320–339.

13 — This is the stance that Deleuze would never accept, because he would reject the moral definition of any activity and would not agree with superimposing any notion or term over the process of production. He would also never define any creative production as labor.

14 — Evald Ilyenkov, “On the Materialist Understanding of Thought as a Subject of Logic,” in *Philosophy and Culture* (Political Literature, 1991), 223.

15 — Paolo Virno, when juxtaposing the notions of the general and the universal, says that the general for him means contingent concatenation and sharing between separated singularities. Pascal Gielen and Sonja Lavaert, “The Dismasure of Art: Interview with Paolo Virno,” in Pascal Gielen and Paul de Bruyne, eds., *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times* (NAi Publishers, 2009).

10 — Ilyenkov, “Dialectics of the Ideal,” 263.

11 — Ibid., 250–251. Ilyenkov claims that even such Hegelian modes of the ideal as the form of thinking, or the syntactic form, or Marx’s form of cost in the economy, didn’t appear or develop dependent on the individual consciousness and psyche but were molded in the objective outer world, although with the participation of human consciousness. Like present-day speculative realists,

Ilyenkov insists that there is a material world as it exists, independent from its mediated correlation with the social and cultural forms of the experience. But if for speculative realists such an assertion means that all other elements—human, cultural, social—should be separated from the contingent immanence of matter, Ilyenkov thinks that the material independence of the world is dialectically intertwined with the socially organized world of human culture.

But for Ilyenkov, the general or the common is not individual consciousness repeated many times, whether concatenated or united. Neither is it an entity or unity understood as the principal invariant or example of less important empirical cases and details. Rather, it is the dimension of the non-individual present within the individual—separate from her/his nominal involvement in communicative or collective practice. It is in fact due to this non-individuality in the individual that collective practice can be productive in the first place.

Thus the general is a category of logic and ethics rather than of mathematics or metaphysics. It presupposes being for the other—not

only for human beings but things as well. For example, two chairs are less general than a chair and table together, or the reader and the book, or the employer and the employees. So that generality—commonality—is not just a sharing or collecting of something, but is rather a connection of two or more things brought together by their mutual lack, and thus their mutual need. Generality connects to amplify one's lack in the other. And such an interpretation of the notion of the general is an important invention of Ilyenkov, influenced by Hegel's notion of non-self being.

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## Our Beloved Margins: The Imaginings of the Roma Transformative Subject and Art History Scholarship in Central Europe

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TÍMEA JUNGHHAUS

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Like the late Polish art historian and theorist Piotr Piotrowski, I too was “trained in an art history in which we were told that the centre, especially French art, was universal.”<sup>1</sup> This approach to art history was liberating in its deterritorialized, unsituated, and universal form, but it was also, at times, superficial, overly theoretical, abstract, and completely oblivious to my Central European and Roma reality. Examining the marginal phenomena of Roma artistic production and Roma representation in more than five decades of art history,<sup>2</sup> we can perhaps ask whether it is possible to draw any conclusions about how our beloved margins—in this essay, specifically Roma margins—have shed light on this scholarship?

Paul Gilroy, in his essay “Race Ends Here,” published in 1998, claims that the usefulness

of race as an analytical category has come to an end because of the profound transformations of the last few decades in how the body is understood, largely as a result of the emergence of molecular biology, digital processing, and other technologies.<sup>3</sup> While I would like to nurture this fantasy, today it seems that for the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe—where states still retain control over access to political rights and economic opportunities; where under the banner of free speech, hate speech has become the public norm; and where anti-Gypsyism is still considered a moderate attitude—the reconstruction and reconceptualization of race and the connection of Roma emancipatory efforts with global and transnational networks offer a potential outlet for the expansion of suppressed hopes. They also provide an opportunity to implicitly question the primacy of the national.

Reconstructing the “Roma race” is a double-edged sword. Still, it is an important “weapon” at a time when Roma face a wide spectrum of anti-Gypsyism, ranging from fascist violence

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1 — Piotr Piotrowski, in an interview by Richard Kosinsky, Jan Elantkowski, and Barbara Dudás, “A Way to Follow: Interview with Piotr Piotrowski,” *ArtMargins Online*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interviews-sp-837925570/758-a-way-to-follow-interview-with-piotr-piotrowski>.

2 — Exploration of Roma artistic production in Central European art-history scholarship began in the late 1960s with the first exhibitions of Roma art—in Hungary, Romania, and Czechoslovakia—and the associated publications and critical responses.

3 — Paul Gilroy, “Race Ends Here,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, no. 5, 1998, pp. 838–847.

to sophisticated and subtle academic racism. In this strategy, Roma scholars argue, exhaustively, that the Roma community should be considered Europe's largest colony. The post-colonial discourse framing the Roma has been disputed in academic circles that argue that the countries of Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe (where Roma populations are the largest) are historically and structurally different from those of Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> Roma theorists argue that Central Europe cannot be excised from the rest of the world and that postcolonial theories about whiteness and race offer a new understanding of the complexities of Roma oppression in this region as well. The most comprehensive and convincing argument in this regard was offered by Angéla Kóczé and Nidhi Trehan in their article "Racism, (Neo) colonialism and Social Justice: The Struggle for the Soul of the Romani Movement in Post-Socialist Europe." Kóczé and Trehan point out that colonialism, in relation to the Roma, should be understood as the "majorities' strategy for maintaining asymmetrical relations of economic and political power (just as Edward Said talks about 'orientalism' as deploying a variety of strategies in which the common factor is the resultant position of superiority for Westerners vis-à-vis the 'Orient')."<sup>5</sup> Kóczé, a social anthropologist who is herself of Roma origin, concludes that if we fail to apply the postcolonial theoretical framework when describing the situation of European Roma, we merely preserve the idea of the "Gypsy problem," which she defines as "the discourse that tends to construct the problems that Roma experience (unemployment, poverty, and other manifestations of social exclusion) as essentialized by-products of the Gypsies' own culture (e.g., Roma are inherently 'socially inadaptably' and 'intellectually deficient')."<sup>6</sup> But when we situate the Roma in the domain of the postcolonial, we challenge the "Gypsy problem" characterization by "identifying European institutional and individual

racism and discrimination as being at the root of the problems Roma people face."<sup>7</sup>

The idea that the "Gypsy" is "black" is present in literary sources and contemporary discourses alike. At Hungarian flea markets, we can see an entire trade based on "gypsy girl" paintings, and on just a single trip to Budapest's Ecseri flea market, I counted over thirty such home decor objects. And as one vendor told me, "The sellers confess that the darker they [the girls in the pictures] are, the better they sell."<sup>8</sup> As Ian Hancock, a professor of Roma studies, notes, Roma have long depended on a system of black/white imagery. He also describes how the Romani term for Southeastern Europe (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, etc.), where the highest number of Roma live, is *Kali Oropa* ("Black Europe").<sup>9</sup>

As early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Western art history unveiled a set of images that reduce Roma people to an iconography of the stranger, the pagan, the alien, the thief, showing them as evil and ugly. Further art-historical research<sup>10</sup> is needed to explore the formation of the iconographic types by which Roma have been depicted so we can deconstruct these images and offer other examples where the analyses of these visual products contribute to our knowledge about the Roma and the Romani past. We already have several studies that demonstrate how the Roma body has been denigrated, sexualized, and feminized in Western art.<sup>11</sup>

7 — Angéla Kóczé, "Sites of Visibility," presentation at the international conference "Context, Visibility, Representation," April 17, 2010, Trafó House of Contemporary Arts in collaboration with the Hungarian Roma Parliament, Budapest.

8 — From an interview with a vendor at the Ecseri flea market, Budapest, in 2013.

9 — Ian Hancock, "The Struggle for the Control of Identity," *Transitions: Changes in Post-Communist Societies*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1998, pp. 36–59.

10 — Studies about the image of the Roma in Western art and Roma iconography in art history include: Alena Volrábová, *Die deutsche Zeichnung des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts: Zeichnungen von Autoren aus deutschsprachigen Ländern in den Museumssammlungen der Tschechischen Republik*, Národní Galerie, Prague, 2003; Charles D. Cuttler, "Exotics in 15th-Century Netherlandish Art: Comments on Oriental and Gypsy Costume," in Herman Liebaers, *Liber Amicorum Herman Liebaers*, ed. Frans Vanwijngaerden et al., Les Amis de la Bibliothèque royale Albert Ier, Brussels, 1984; Erwin Pokorny, "The Gypsies and Their Impact on Fifteenth-Century Western European Iconography," in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence: The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, Miegunyah Press, Carlton, Australia, 2009, pp. 597–601.

11 — See, for example, Ian Hancock, "The 'Gypsy' Stereotype and the Sexualization of Romani Women," in *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays*, ed. Dileep Karanth, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield, Herts., UK, 2010, pp. 212–222; and Éva Judit Kovács, "Fekete testek, fehér testek" ("Black Bodies, White Bodies"), *Beszélő*, vol. 14, no. 1, January 2009 (in Hungarian), <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/fekete-testek-feher-testek>.

4 — This battle within the knowledge-production system has led to many researchers arguing passionately and exhaustively for the legitimacy of postcolonial discourse in the Central European Roma context. Debating something that should have been recognized long ago seems bewildering and perplexing, even more so because the arguments often meet with paternalistic reactions or contemptuous marginalization from the academic world. Bringing this struggle to light, however, is already a great achievement.

5 — Angéla Kóczé and Nidhi Trehan, "Racism, (Neo)colonialism and Social Justice: The Struggle for the Soul of the Romani Movement in Post-Socialist Europe," in *Racism, Postcolonialism, Europe*, ed. Graham Huggan and Ian Law, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2009, p. 53.

6 — Ibid., p. 54.

In the panoptic regime of Central European modernity, when Central European artists set out to “find” their own primitives and their own “blacks,” they turned to the colonies closest to them in which they could locate the wild and untamed—the Roma settlements of Central Europe.<sup>12</sup> As the sociologist Éva Judit Kovács concludes in her essay “Black Bodies, White Bodies”: “Gypsies became the pendants of Western Europe’s African and Asian primitives.”<sup>13</sup> It is also a strategy of Roma art-history writing to reclaim images that have been (mis)appropriated or (mis)interpreted as representations of other minorities (e.g., blacks, Jews, Arabs, etc.) in order, ultimately, to bring Roma into the complex postcolonial power games of our contemporary reality. Perhaps in a few decades this segment of art-history scholarship will develop sensitivity and practice in scrutinizing the dominant regimes of visual gazes so as to relate them to the intentions in the Roma’s own mode of looking.

There is constant tension between epistemology and chronology as we attempt the construction of the long-suppressed and hidden genealogy of Roma cultural history. Through its use of methodological devices considered radical in the field of Roma studies—such as the notion of decoloniality, postcolonial theory, trauma studies, feminist scholarship, and cultural studies—such research, including the examination of Roma artistic production, demonstrates (self-)awareness of the “postcolonial constellation” in which it is embedded.<sup>14</sup> And while any critical interest that takes contemporary art as its focus necessarily refers to the foundational base of modern art history and its roots in imperial discourse, and should also point to the pressures that the postcolonial discourse exerts on art-historical narratives today, situating Roma in the postcolonial discourse, even today, is considered a kind of playful and experimental endeavour, a practice preferred primarily by the Roma intelligentsia. But as literary critic Édouard Glissant writes:

“All subjectivities that emerge directly from the convergences and proximities wrought by imperialism . . . direct us to the postcolonial.”<sup>15</sup>

In this strategy of inhabiting the colony and identifying with the racialized colored subaltern Roma, artists take up the strategies of critical whiteness. A great deal of artistic practice and curatorial work focuses on the analysis or description of the non-Roma, in other words, whiteness and its racism, nationalism, and Roma-hatred. These efforts resituate “whiteness” from its unspoken status in order to shed light precisely on the perpetuation of the asymmetry that has marred critical analyses of racial/ethnic formation and cultural practice, in which the majority (white) position remained unexamined, unqualified, essential, homogeneous, seemingly self-fashioned, and unmarked by history or practice.

Researching photographic archives in the Roma collections of Central European public museums,<sup>16</sup> we can find an outrageous number of pictures of Roma that either serve the rather prurient desires of the collectors or are simply indecent and offensive. At the exhibition *Archive of Desires*, which I curated at Gallery8 – Roma Contemporary Art Space in Budapest in April 2015, photos from these collections were displayed in miniaturized form: visitors could view them only under magnification. This subversive curatorial strategy was a gesture that emphasized surveillance and voyeurism. The magnifiers not only enlarged the images, but also stressed the significance and nature of the gaze. The images themselves trigger a flood of questions, and many arouse a deep sense of outrage, including, for example, an amateur ethnographer’s picture of half-naked Roma girls standing in line, which verges on pornography; a Roma family whose dog, too, is able to pose for the ethnographer’s camera; and photographs that show strange grinning figures with exposed breasts, who, according to the non-Roma ethnographer, are mothers breastfeeding their over-aged children.

From the captions that are attached to these archival materials, it is clear that the Roma cultural heritage, the Roma past, and pictures of

12 — This strategy was examined in the 2007 exhibition *Roma und Sinti: “Zigeuner-Darstel-lungen” der Moderne*, curated by Gerhard Baumgartner, László Beke, Tayfun Belgin, Tanja Pirsig-Marschall, Péter Szuhay, and Éva Judit Kovács at the Kunsthalle in Krems, Austria. See Gerhard Baumgartner and Éva Judit Kovács, “Roma und Sinti im Blickfeld der Aufklärung und der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft,” in *Roma und Sinti: “Zigeuner-Darstel-lungen” der Moderne*, ed. Gerhard Baumgartner and Tayfun Belgin, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Krems, Krems, Austria, 2007, pp. 15–23.

13 — See Éva Judit Kovács, “Fekete testek, fehér testek” (referenced in n. 11).

14 — See Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 34, no. 4, Winter 2003, pp. 57–82.

15 — Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, ed. A. James Arnold, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1992, p. 72.

16 — State museums with extensive Roma photographic collections include, in Hungary, the Museum of Ethnography (Budapest), the Nógrád Historical Museum (Salgótarján), and the Museum of Hungarian Naive Artists (Kecskemét), as well as the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, the Ethnographic Museum of the National Museum in Prague, and the Weltmuseum in Vienna.



Tamara Moyzes. *Museum of Ethnology III*. 2015. Photocollage, 17<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 36<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (45 × 92 cm).  
Courtesy the artist and Gallery8, Roma Contemporary Art Space, Budapest

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our Roma ancestors are lying in archives that register only the names of the collectors and ethnographers, not the people in the photographs. In the same exhibition, the triptych *Museum of Ethnology*, by contemporary artist Tamara Moyzes, worked with the image from the 1944 photograph *Line of Roma Girls* by an amateur Austrian ethnographer, one of the photos displayed under a magnifying glass. Moyzes imagines and plays with the context and environment of the original photographic work. Her artwork stages the specifically white nudist tradition next to the line of half-naked Roma girls: the line of white girls remains surprisingly transparent, unmarked, and “normal” next to the dark-skinned, coquettish, and provocatively exposed Roma girls. Perhaps the Roma girls had been violently forced to pose for the camera, a suggestion presented by the second panel of the triptych. Meanwhile, the third section, using humor to make its point, calls attention to the normalcy of the culture of the naked white female body and how it is fetishized in the context of the tradition of beauty competitions.

Another example of postcolonial critical strategies in Roma art practice is provided by Tibor Balogh’s photograph *Self-Portrait as Sándor Petőfi* (2015). Balogh grew up as an orphan in Hungary’s largest state orphanage, in the village of Tiszadob, where many Roma children were sent from other orphanages during the 1970s and 1980s. Tiszadob is an iconic place, where many Roma intellectuals in today’s Central European Roma cultural movement once spent part of their childhood. Balogh is the first artist of Roma origin to receive a degree in fine art in Central Europe. The engravings he presented in *Whose Nation?*, an exhibition at Gallery8 in the summer of 2015,<sup>17</sup> pay tribute to Tiszadob, the place he considers home. *Self-Portrait as Sándor Petőfi* is a complex work: the image of the Roma artist, posing as Petőfi, the “most famous” Hungarian poet, suggests a revision of Hungary’s essentialist nation-concept that questions the patriotism of minorities. Balogh’s work demonstrates both his loyalty and his longing for a new nation-concept in which the desire to belong can be fulfilled.

Exposing the Western universality of art as a historical legend has always been the objective of Gallery8, which opened in 2013. As Piotr Piotrowski once noted, when we explore the

“local,” we find that “art that is located in a particular historical and cultural context would lose its universality.”<sup>18</sup> He further suggested that “the way to provincialize the center is to locate it.”<sup>19</sup> Gallery8’s chosen critical-theoretical framework and its focus on the topography of Hungary’s cultural scene follow this strategy of “provincializing the center” and questioning the “universality” of art. The space, established and run by the European Roma Cultural Foundation, is strategically located on Mátyás Square, in the heart of Budapest’s 8th District, which is densely populated by Roma. Despite the gallery’s modest size, it is ideal for both a progressive intervention in Europe’s contemporary art scene and a long-term, sustainable cultural initiative in the Hungarian Roma community. The gallery envisions a future of artistic and cultural diversity in which Roma art, culture, history, and language are valued and respected as equal to other traditions; it believes that the power of artistic creation and education, especially by and for young people, is essential to change negative stereotypes toward people of Roma origin. The gallery serves the Roma community, facilitating and supporting the production, presentation, and interpretation of Roma artworks. It is an intercultural space, a “contact zone,” in the sense put forth by cultural theorist Mary Louise Pratt in her inspirational essay “Arts of the Contact Zone”:<sup>20</sup> here Roma and non-Roma can engage in experimentation, creation, collaboration, and discussion, resulting in new works and solutions for a future of peaceful coexistence.

To find models for imagining a radical vision for the Roma transformative subject, the Roma movement turns to other transnational networks and cultures. If we acknowledge that the idea of decoloniality in the Roma context suggests, among other things, that the Roma movement is in search of a “new humanity”<sup>21</sup> or that it seeks “social liberation from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and domination,”<sup>22</sup> then as the Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has proposed, we should rightly turn to

18 — Piotr Piotrowski, in “A Way to Follow” (referenced in n. 1).

19 — Ibid.

20 — Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33–40.

21 — See Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2011.

22 — Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, nos. 2–3, 2007, p. 178.

17 — The exhibition *Whose Nation? Reimagined National Identities* was curated by cultural theorist Árpád Bak, June 23–July 30, 2015. See <http://gallery8.org/en/news/2/67/whose-nation-reimagined-national-identities>.

the feminists, who have long known how to use state mechanisms so that neither nationalism nor fascism shall gain ground.<sup>23</sup> The art of Roma woman artists—such as Omara, Selma Selman, Kiba Lumberg, and Delaine Le Bas—is organized around the question of visibility and how the Roma artist can rewrite or modify the mainstream discourse once she arrives at a position of visibility. In this sense, these artists apply feminist strategies: when it comes to defending the interests of the Roma minority, they do not rely exclusively on visual art but operate also through actions, scandals, demonstrations, and political statements, using the media (print, broadcast, or electronic) to disseminate their views.

The radical discourse of the Roma diasporic identity can already be identified in the common policies developed at the First World Romani Congress in 1971 in Orpington, a suburb of London, including the ratification of a politically correct name (Roma), the establishment of a national anthem, and an agreement on the Roma flag. These policies manifest a transgressive extraterritorial political identity; identification with an imagined commonality based on a non-territorial “us,” scattered in diasporic spaces. This new discourse employs narratives, images, events, and objects—in other words, culture. It is aware of other transnational movements and has so far been inspired by the transnational feminist movement, the movements of other subaltern groups, and the liberating notions of contemporary identity theory, such as creolization, border gnosis, third space, decoloniality, etc.

When searching for radical visions for the Roma identity, Roma make a conscious effort to de-link from existing bodies of knowledge and unlearn what has been taught about the Roma in Europe. The recent re-exploration of the forgotten and unwritten history of the Roma shows us that Roma have had the strength to oppose oppression and participate in various forms of resistance, and so have the capacity to inhabit roles other than that of victim. In this immersive unlearning and rewriting of Roma history, the history of Roma resistance replaces a history of oppression. The exhibition *(Re-)Conceptualizing Roma Resistance*, which I

curated at the Hellerau European Centre for the Arts in Dresden in April 2016, approaches the concept of resistance as enacted by Roma people across the diaspora by focusing specifically on the emerging body of literature and current narratives, embodiments, and expressions.

The new research on Roma resistance during the Holocaust and afterwards<sup>24</sup>—which is being conducted as a collaborative project between Roma scholars, artists, organizations, and activists—testifies to Roma taking an active and conscious role in shaping their lives and defining their own fate. It reveals new sources that demonstrate how Roma stood out in their conduct, as compared to other inmates in the camps, and developed survival strategies to preserve and maintain their dignity even in the most daunting circumstances. The research compiles a history of escapes from the camps as well as uprisings in the Zigeunerlager at Auschwitz on May 16 and August 2, 1944; it explores the memory of Roma heroes and the non-Roma supporters of the Roma resistance movement, as well as the active and heroic participation of Roma people in anti-fascist partisan movements throughout Europe under the National Socialist regime. In this process of relearning, Roma resistance emerges as an inspiring model for Roma knowledge, agency, and consciousness. Roma contemporary artists also play an important role in emphasizing manifestations and narratives of Roma resistance as central to the Roma experience. And Roma art itself is seen as a well-thought-out and creative method of Roma resistance, a well-established form of cultural survival and a demonstration of ethical and political commitment to the future of the Roma community.

In preparation for International Roma Day and the forty-fifth anniversary of the First International Roma Congress on April 8, 2016, Europe celebrates the aspirations of the Roma transformative subject, the prospect of a new historical and political tectonics, the power of assembly, and the alliances we are building for Roma self-determination.

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23 — Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in conversation with Suzana Milevska, “Resistance that Cannot Be Recognized as Such: A Conversation Between Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Suzana Milevska,” in *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, Queer and Networking Conditions*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Rosa Reitsamer, Löcker, Vienna, 2008, p. 278.

24 — The ongoing research project “The Roma and Resistance during the Holocaust and in Its Aftermath,” begun in 2010, was initiated by the non-profit organization La Voix des Roms, in collaboration with the TernYpe International Roma Youth Network and the Tom Lantos Institute, and supported by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

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# Drawing a Border (Reartikulacija, Part 3 of 3)

MARINA GRŽINIĆ

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The dissolution of borders appears to mark the last chapter in the success story of the neoliberal capitalist world. This is also the stage upon which a whole history in relation to the Wall that once divided East and West Berlin, and Europe, is constructed. On page six of the August 2008 issue of Lufthansa's inflight magazine, a full-page German National Tourist Board advertisement announces 2009 as the year of the 20th anniversary celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the slogan, "Welcome to a land without borders." Although we now have a feeling that invisible borders are preventing the space of the world (or, to be precise, that of the neoliberal global capitalist world) from being open and flexible, we nevertheless have to think differently. On one side, we witness an unbelievable circulation of positions that prevent us from imagining the space of contemporary art and culture, the social and economic, as being enclosed by borders; on the other, we witness the disappearance of borders that firmly installed such clear divisions in the past (as in the time of imperialist capitalism). What we are now witnessing is a process in which this disintegration of borders is part of an ideological, discursive process reorganizing the new Europe, as well as the world.

This question concerning the disappearance of borders is closely connected to processes through which capital is accumulated. One process is what David Harvey has called "accumulation by dispossession," in which wealth is accumulated through redistribution and appropriation of assets (through the channels of credit systems, predatory speculation, privatization of land assets, etc.).<sup>1</sup> The second process is what we are facing today, what Michael Hudson has termed "the imperialism of circulation."<sup>2</sup> In his 1972 book *Super Imperialism: The Economic Strategy of American Empire* (republished in 2003),<sup>3</sup> Hudson describes not

a crisis of gaps in distribution, but the opposite. Already in 1972, Hudson announces that the borders preventing distribution would be removed by the imperialism of circulation. It is my position that both of these processes—accumulation by dispossession and the imperialism of circulation—have to be seen not as two distinct means of accumulating capital, but rather as operating sequentially, with one (dispossession) creating the conditions for the other (circulation) to dominate.

But what subsequently becomes important is a parallel process equivalent to Hudson's "imperialism of endless circulation," in which—with reference to Jelica Šumić-Riha's article "Prisoners of the Inexistent Other"—what is really impossible in the world of capitalism today is impossibility as such. These two ideas work together: on one side the imperialism of circulation; on the other the impossibility of something being impossible.<sup>4</sup> The imperialism of circulation, in its frenetic processes, prevents any subversion, any attack on a master entity. Because everything circulates, everything exchanges, no obstacles are to be found in the network that structures reality for us. Those once perceived as enemies, from individuals to institutions, behave as if we were all in the same "shit," as if we are all together, as if we all have to find the remedies to our problems, needs, obstacles, and the like. Meanwhile, those responsible for expropriation and dispossession have seemingly been forgotten. It is almost impossible to say that something is impossible today. Or, to put this differently: a subversive act was possible in the past to disrupt clear divisions in society. We had the borders; the big Other, the virtual symbolic order, the network that structured reality gave "consistency" to things, so to speak. In its singularity, there was almost a guarantee of some kind of subversive intervention against it. The world today presents itself in endless circulation—a "friendly" and endless exchange—and only one measure is proposed to confront problems of expropriation, enslavement, and neocolonial

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1 — See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 159.

2 — See Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Economic Strategy of American Empire* (Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

3 — Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World Dominance*, 2nd ed. (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2003).

4 — Jelica Šumić-Riha, "Jetniki Drugega, ki ne obstaja" ("Prisoners of the Inexistent Other"), *Filozofski vestnik—Acta Philosophica* 1 (2007): 81–103.

interventions though capital, and this is called “coordination.” I recently came across a serious political proposal suggesting effective “coordination” as the only thing to be done. My question is: can we really be dumb enough to believe in such naïve theories? We have to be clear that it is impossible to overcome social antagonism and class struggle through a managerial “coordination” of social, political, and economic levels of society.

In an atmosphere of such cheerful celebration of a world without borders, it becomes necessary to advance another thesis or logic—we need borders more than ever. How is this possible? The answer is very simple: to establish a border means to present, to incorporate, to take a clear political stance, to ask for a political act, to draw a line of division that can rearticulate this new world that seems to be without borders—in which the only thing that seems impossible is impossibility as such. Is this the realization of a dream? If so, then whose dream? Whose mobility? Whose impossibility? To show a border within the inconsistency of the big Other means to act—to act politically. This act changes the very coordinates of this impossibility—it is only through this act that I can effectively assume the big Other’s nonexistence. This implies not only that one has to take representation into one’s own hands and establish a border in a cynical situation in which the only thing that is impossible is impossibility as such; as Šumič-Riha argues, it is also necessary to build a framework, to establish new parameters and coordinates for the political act. What is then required is a precise new conceptual and paradigmatic political act within this new framework. The political act is always a division—a placement of a border within a space, reconfiguring, closing, or stopping the imperialism of circulation without difference as it establishes a new structure to which to relate. An act is always performed through enunciation, which not only sets the parameters that initiate the act itself, but the parameters in relation to the Other, whom it addresses as well. A political act is that which interrupts a situation in which the only impossible thing in the world is impossibility as such.

In the case of so-called Fortress Europe, in order to realize the dream of its borderlessness, it has been necessary to apply a process of fierce equalization to all strata of its societies, with regard to their social, educational, and cultural aspects. By installing one of the most ferocious politics of dispossession, local specificities were transformed into ethnic ones, and one general path of history and genealogy was established as the only valid one for art, culture, science, and the social sciences—the capitalist deregulation of history, present, and future.

Thus, in rearticulating a certain history of global capitalism and borders, it becomes clear that, though the so-called multicultural ideology of global neoliberal capitalism during the 1990s declared the existence of other worlds, it did so only (and solely) to set the stage for a second step, for the iron logic of the imperialism of circulation to take hold. In order to do this, an accelerated process of dispossession was put to work to clean up and evacuate every difference. These two stages are captured in the field of contemporary art in a project I have dealt with on another occasion.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, Mladen Stilinović declared, “An artist who cannot speak English is NO artist.” As a work of art, this sentence depicted exceptionally well the initial multicultural logic of 1990s neoliberal global capitalism. It indicated a specificity that had to use the “common language” of translation, regardless of how good it was. A decade later, in 2007, I proposed a correction of this sentence-as-artwork: “An artist who cannot speak English WELL is NO artist.” This is the new process of dispossession that goes along with the process of emptying the world of any political content—it is a formalization and equalization of positions that allows for easy circulation.

Originally published in *e-flux journal* 2 (January 2009). Reartikulacija is an art project by a group consisting of Marina Gržinić, Staš Kleindienst, Sebastjan Leban, and Tanja Passoni. The group also publishes *Reartikulacija*, a journal for politics, art, and theory, edited by Gržinić and Leban.

5 — See Marina Gržinić, *Re-Politicizing Art, Theory, Representation and New Media Technology* (Vienna: Schlebrügge, 2008).



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid. *Naked Freedom*. 2010. Video (color and black and white, sound), 19:27 min.  
Courtesy the artists

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NSK. *NSK Passport*. 1992. Courtesy the artists

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# Conversation

MIRAN MOHAR, ANDREJ SAVSKI, ROMAN URANJEK, AND BORUT VOGELNIK  
OF IRWIN WITH MEGHAN FORBES

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**MEGHAN FORBES:** The inextricable relation of art and politics is made explicit in the multidisciplinary output of the NSK, of which IRWIN was a founding member. In response to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the disintegration of communism in the region, NSK created the conceptual art project State in Time and has since operated as a sovereign state of sorts. With regards to the 1992 *NSK Embassy Moscow*, Eda Čufer and IRWIN wrote that “NSK confers the status of state not upon territory but upon the mind, whose borders are in a state of flux.” How does NSK reflect this tenet now, twenty-five years later?

**ANDREJ SAVSKI:** I view the creation of State in Time a bit differently, not just as a response to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the disintegration of communism, but rather as a creation of a new form and of a specific social community; it is rooted in the practice of collectivism that characterized the early NSK and which was accelerated through the activities of NSK citizens, such as those at the Berlin Congress and Folk Art Biennials. The tenet you are quoting is an important one that is still relevant and necessary for the preservation of potential possibilities of further open development. It is important to keep all options open, not only for us but also for the citizens.

**BORUT VOGELNIK:** It seems important to indicate which politics are inextricably related, and how they are related, to art. Even before establishing IRWIN, we were, as young artists, very interested in the conditions of art production and were entirely dissatisfied with the art system in the former Yugoslavia. We publicly disagreed with the policies enacted by art institutions and decided not only to create art but to build an independent support system for the art we were making, from the level of production to distribution, without the need to emigrate. This was new. It was possible only because of the political instability within the former Yugoslavia that manifested already in the early 1980s. It is the inextricable relation of the genre of painting and its immediate political context, the politics of the art system, both local and international, that significantly regulates how the work is perceived and positioned, that can be traced in IRWIN’s work from its inception until today.

**MIRAN MOHAR:** IRWIN and the NSK groups were never political in the sense of daily politics. We never commented on such political issues in direct political language. But IRWIN projects like *East Art Map*, contemporary art collections, and other projects related to the construction of missing elements within the art system in Eastern Europe were truly political.

We established the NSK State as a communication channel to serve our goals. It became evident over time that many other people from other parts of the world identified with its principles, demonstrated by the fact that the number of NSK citizens has grown to over fifteen thousand since 1992. We can see a constant flux of various activities and projects of NSK citizens related to the NSK State in Time. Just to mention some of the most recent ones: NSK State Reserve in New York started issuing NSK money and bonds, and in the last four years there were also two NSK Folk Art Biennials (Leipzig in 2014 and Ballyvaughan, Ireland, in 2016) presenting art related to NSK and its groups, as well as an NSK State in Time initiated and organized entirely by NSK citizens. Such an expansion of activity was not predicted, and it occurred without advertising from our state. In my opinion, the development of NSK State in Time went beyond our own expectations, and citizens took over in full. One can understand NSK State in Time as an experiment that is opening new possibilities of social organization beyond the physical borders of nation-states. The beauty of this project lies in the fact that its outcomes cannot be predicted. NSK State in Time is an artifact that has taken on a life of its own, independent of its original creators.

**MF:** It is interesting that you call NSK State in Time an “artifact.” There is a strong archival quality to the work of IRWIN, exhibited in its obsessive mapping, charting, and framing. Several past projects, such as the *East Art Map* volume and the *Retroavantgarde* installations hung in various exhibition spaces, are both a “re-make” (a term used by Borut Vogelnik in an interview conducted together with Miran Mohar for Alexandru Poglár in 2006) and a reappropriation of contemporary art-world and historical avant-garde imagery. IRWIN’s conceptualization of the relationship of the past to



the present seems less a Futurist-style rejection of all old models and more a process of collection and synthetic recontextualization of prior artistic strategies to confront directly the real social and political conditions within which you/we are operating currently. Do you conceive of IRWIN as creating a sort of living archive, prone to pedagogical ends?

**BV:** You are right; we did not act like the avant-garde was supposed to. We had good reasons for this. If you want to reject the old model, you should define what that model is and find out who is controlling it, in order for that rejection to make any sense at all. The Slovene and Yugoslav art system was completely dependent on importing -isms from the West and adapting those imports to the local context. We publicly declared the art establishment irrelevant and provoked it to enter into open conflict with us. At the same time, we had begun to observe that in the East it was still possible to intervene in the field of articulation as a “private individual,” while elsewhere this was the exclusive domain of institutions.

**AS:** IRWIN is less the production of an archive and more the creation of constructs that exist in time. To my mind, projects such as *Retroavantgarde* and *East Art Map* are vehicles that suggest a parallel view and thus shape our understanding of the past or present.

**BV:** *Retroavantgarde*, which is presented and regarded as an artifact, is in fact a scheme of specific art production subsumed under the category “*Retroavantgarde*.” It presents the interrelations between a group of selected artists represented by their original works. Meanwhile, *East Art Map* was never meant to be an art project; it was meant to be a map representing the art production within a certain territory, an orientation tool that we, being artists from the East, knew from our own experience to be important.

**MF:** To what extent do IRWIN and the NSK depend on a collective or community that extends beyond the group itself?

**ROMAN URANJEK:** IRWIN is one of the founding member groups of the larger NSK collective, established in 1984, a year after the IRWIN group had come into existence. Our idea took the perspective of the historical avant-gardes—such as the Bauhaus and postwar movements like Fluxus—as a starting point. The fundamental body of NSK consists of twelve individual persons. Through our activity, various poetics have been developed, and the working principle of every individual group has followed the rules of its own creative medium (music,

theater, design, contemporary artistic practice, painting). And now, after more than three decades, we have twelve different notions and interpretations concerning the question of what NSK represents and whether it still exists at all.

**MM:** IRWIN is a collective with direct democratic decision-making, and NSK was always more of an initiative, an organizational umbrella of all groups rather than a collective in the true sense of the word. The formation of IRWIN and, later, NSK was partly also a substitution for the insufficiencies of the art system in the 1980s in Slovenia. We pooled our knowledge, skills, and economic resources. In the 1990s, relations between the various NSK groups became looser. NSK transformed into the NSK State in Time in 1992 as a decision of all NSK members. It is important to stress that each NSK group was always independent and that all groups have a different logic of functioning and decision-making, partly due to the nature of the mediums they work in. I can say that IRWIN understands the NSK State in Time as a sovereign community that independently uses the frame of the NSK State to realize its projects. IRWIN collaborates on various projects with individual NSK citizens or their groups.

**BV:** The results of the self-organization of NSK citizens are increasingly on display. It is important that *NSKstate.com*, the key domain where one can find information about NSK, was organized and managed by NSK citizens and not by the original Neue Slowenische Kunst. Communication between the citizens of NSK has developed around and through this internet project, and has gradually grown into joint campaigns and projects.

**AS:** We have always willingly collaborated with various communities, mainly on the project level. The *Retroavantgarde* project included collaboration with artists from the territory of Yugoslavia; *East Art Map* was done with the help of artists and curators from Eastern Europe; and the recent NSK Pavilion was probably the most complex collaborative project so far, which included what one might call an expatriate community of migrants, both artists and non-artists.

**MF:** In the introduction to *East Art Map*, published in 2006, IRWIN posits: “While it is true that a number of catalogues and books dedicated to various aspects of the contemporary art of the East have recently appeared, rather little has been done in the way of making serious comparisons between the Eastern and Western European context for art production.



In this area, a no man's land continues to exist that divides one half of the continent from the other." This "no man's land" is delineated cartographically in the volume as a large, blacked-out area where Eastern Europe would be. Do you still find this division to be palpable today, or are there more comparative, dialogical East/West approaches to the region that have cropped up over the last decade?

**BV:** Definitely a lot has changed regarding this question, not only with regard to an East/West axis in Europe, but globally. By drawing a map of undefined entities, you are in fact inventing them, and as far as I know there are only a few initiatives at present dealing with art on a global scale.

**MM:** The situation has partly changed for the better, but there are still substantial differences between Eastern Europe and the West. In Eastern Europe, there continues to be a strong dichotomy between the development of an art system—institutions, galleries, collectors, and art education (with some very honorable exceptions)—on the one hand, and high-quality art production (since the end of World War II through today) on the other. Recently, artists from Eastern Europe have figured in some of the most important international exhibitions. Since the art system has developed only partly (though the state of things is much better than it was before the 1990s), artists still have to count on galleries and support from abroad. Of course, the expansion of the EU makes things easier, but there is still a big economic difference, which, as we all know, also plays a major role in art. We were always aware of the fact that unless we organized ourselves, we would be organized by others. It is great to see that there are many individual and official initiatives that are making Eastern Europe more conducive to fostering contemporary art, increasing the possibilities of living and working here.

**AS:** While I don't have much insight here, I am sure things improved a bit in the last decade. However, with regard to established hierarchies and the valorization of art from the West, I do not notice any substantial change.

**MF:** NSK has often drawn on symbols appropriated from totalitarian or extreme nationalist movements belonging to different political ideologies. Now that ideologies are more codified within a global system, what are your most salient forms for quotation and critique? Can you speak a bit, for instance, about the decision to create the NSK State Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, in 2017?

**MM:** The iconography in IRWIN and NSK artworks was never iconodulist. Different -isms and styles were always juxtaposed in our works. We said in the 1980s that we were painting -isms, art styles and symbols of political -isms, like Cézanne painted apples.

**AS:** We have often worked with images and symbols that have a strong activation potential. It is also true that over time and with repetition, the initial shock of provocative transgression lost its power. But I would say that what really interested us was not the provocation, since that is a statement in-relation-to, but the creation of a parallel form, a form that stands next-to, not necessarily against. In the case of State in Time, it showed that this kind of reasoning actually had a bigger subversive potential, and not only in relation to the Slovene state but to the institution of the state as such.

**BV:** The decision to install the NSK State Pavilion at the Venice Biennale was intentional, but not intended to be a critique of the biennale itself, even if we understood that such a decision could not avoid being seen as one. Its specific organizational structure offered us a unique sociopolitical context in which it was possible to install the NSK State Pavilion side by side and in comparison with pavilions of other states. NSK State in Time has transformed into a community that has started to live its own life. Although it is true that in terms of population size NSK State in Time cannot compare to most other states, one can claim that in terms of the structure of its citizens, it is already a superpower in the field of contemporary art. Its citizens include a number of exceptional, world-renowned artists, art theorists, and curators, for whom even the world's most developed countries in this field would envy us. The NSK State Pavilion is, up to this point, the most complex installation of the abstract organism of NSK State in Time conducted in a physical space.

**RU:** When we decided to establish the NSK State Pavilion, we invited Zdenka Badovinac and Charles Esche to take over the curatorship of our pavilion. The curators decided to represent the idea of a state in which refugees participate and can issue passports. Ahmet Öğüt, a Kurdish artist living in Berlin, was entrusted with the visual representation of the state. The feedback from our colleagues, the visitors to the biennale, and the strong representation of our work across various media—including the BBC, CNN, *Artforum*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*—gives us sufficient hope that we can continue with this project in the future.

The present volume is the product of a vast network of interactions between the C-MAP group at The Museum of Modern Art and other artists, curators, and scholars engaged with research in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The two pages here document visitors from, and scholars on, the region who have visited New York since 2010, including those who were invited to present their work at the Museum. Conversely, the following three spreads map the individuals with whom representatives of the MoMA C-MAP group met during seven separate research trips to Europe between 2010 and 2017. Affiliations for individuals not on staff at MoMA are given as current as of the time of the meeting. A list of MoMA staff members who traveled to Europe is shown for each research trip; the title for each staff member, which is given upon first reference only, reflects her or his most current position within the Museum or, in the case of those who have since left the Museum, their position at the time of departure.



MoMA, NEW YORK

The following scholars were present at the inception of MoMA's C-MAP program and have been instrumental in contributing to its development in the capacity of external advisors: Mieke Bal, Homi Bhabha, and David Joselit.

Just after this book's publication, another C-MAP research trip to the cities of the former German Democratic Republic will be conducted, as the group embarks on new areas of research, which will no doubt inform future inquiries. Continued scholarly engagement with the region of Central and Eastern Europe is also visible through the online global research platform for C-MAP, **post**, which is regularly updated with new articles, interviews, and primary source texts: [post.at.moma.org](http://post.at.moma.org).

## 2010

**Art historians, curators, and scholars:** **László Beke**, Research Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest | **Petra Stegmann**, independent | **Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt**, Freie Universität Berlin | **Kristine Stiles**, Duke University, Durham, NC

## 2011

**Artists:** **Ivana Bago** | **Doorman of the Salon de Fleurus** | **Sanja Iveković** | **Milan Knížák** | **Antonia Majača** | **Dóra Maurer** | **Martha Rosler** | **Ben Vautier** | **Krzysztof Wodiczko** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** **Edit András**, Institute of Art History, Research Centre for the Humanities at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest | **Natasha Becker**, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass. | **Maja Fowkes**, Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, Budapest | **Reuben Fowkes**, Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, Budapest | **Michael Ann Holly**, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass. | **Andres Kurg**, Institute of Art History, Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn | **Magdalena Moskalewicz**, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass. | **Keith Moxey**, Columbia University, New York | **Almira Ousmanova**, European Humanities University | **Bojana Pejić**, independent | **Piotr Piotrowski**, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

## 2012

**Artist:** **Jonas Mekas** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** **Ješa Denegri**, Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade | **Daniel Grűň**, Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Bratislava | **Carmen Popescu**, Université Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne | **Liutauras Psibilskis**, independent | **Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt**, Freie Universität Berlin | **Katarzyna Słoboda**, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź | **Branka Stipančić**, independent | **Jarosław Suchan**, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź | **Biljana Tomić**, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade

## 2013

**Artist:** Yasunao Tone **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Zdenka Badovinac, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana | **Richard Birkett**, Artists Space, New York | **Claire Bishop**, Graduate Center, City University of New York | **David Crowley**, Royal College of Art, London | **Ivet Ćurlin**, What, How and for Whom (WHW) | **Jane Farver**, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Mass. | **Boris Groys**, New York University | **Mária Hlavajová**, BAK (basis voor actuele kunst), Utrecht | **Branden Joseph**, Columbia University, New York | **Renata Salecl**, University of Ljubljana | **Guillermo Santamarina**, La Esmeralda—National School of Painting, Sculpture, and Printmaking, Mexico City | **Rachel Weiss**, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

## 2014

**Artists:** Doorman of the Salon de Fleurus | **Vitaly Komar** | **Irwin Kremen** | **Csaba Nemes** | **Technical Assistant of the Museum of American Art in Berlin** | **Visitor** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Ivana Bago, Duke University, Durham, NC | **Katherine Carl**, Graduate Center, City University of New York | **Ana María León Crespo**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge | **Thierry de Duve**, independent | **Boris Groys**, New York University | **Agata Jakubowska**, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań | **Iva Janáková-Knobloch**, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague | **Jarosław Kozłowski**, University of the Arts in Poznań | **Pavína Morganová**, Academy of Fine Arts, Prague | **Tomáš Pospisyl**, Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts, Prague | **Jane Sharp**, Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ | **Robert Slifkin**, New York University | **Sven Spieker**, University of California, Santa Barbara | **Jovana Stokić**, School of Visual Arts, New York | **Julia Tulovsky**, Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ

## 2015

**Artists:** Yevgeniy Fiks | **Alexander Kosolapov** | **Irina Nakhova** | **Oleksiy Radynski** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** **Claire Bishop**, Graduate Center, City University of New York | **Boris Buden**, independent | **Keti Chukhrov**, Russian State University of the Humanities | **Octavian Eșanu**, American University of Beirut Art Galleries | **Jiří Fajt**, National Gallery in Prague | **Boris Groys**, New York University | **Ksenya Gurshtein**, University of Virginia, Charlottesville | **David Joselit**, Graduate Center, City University of New York | **Milena Kalinowska**, National Gallery in Prague | **Yelena Kalinsky**, Michigan State University | **Klara Kemp-Welch**, Courtauld Institute of Art, London | **Snejana Krasteva**, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow | **Paulina Kurc-Maj**, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź | **Michelle Maydanchik**, Amherst College, Mass. | **Pavína Morganová**, independent | **Daniel Muzyczuk**, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź | **Sasha Obukhova**, Garage

Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow | **Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez**, L'Internationale | **Anna Pravdová**, National Gallery in Prague | **Edit Sasvári**, Kassák Museum, Budapest | **Georg Schöllhammer**, *springer* magazine | **Tijana Stepanović**, OFF-Biennale Budapest | **Margarita Tupitsyn**, independent

## 2016

**Artists:** Gluklya (Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya) | **Emilia Kabakov** | **Eva Kot'átková** | **Lucia Nimcová** | **Ewa Partum** | **Peter Puklus** | **Andrei Roiter** | **Anton Vidokle** | **Arseny Zhilyaev** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Anna Bitkina, TOK, St. Petersburg | **Maja Fowkes**, Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, Budapest | **Reuben Fowkes**, Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, Budapest | **Matthew Jesse Jackson**, University of Chicago | **Olga Kopenkina**, New York University and LIM College, New York | **Ewa Opalka**, independent

## 2017

**Artists:** Yevgeniy Fiks | **Anton Ginzburg** | **Seo Hee Lee** | **Victoria Lomasko** | **Taus Makhacheva** | **Anna Ostoya** | **Hito Steyerl** | **Gediminas Urbonas** | **Nomeda Urbonas** | **Anton Vidokle** | **Artus Virtmanis** | **Srdjan Jovanović Weiss** | **Arseny Zhilyaev** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** **Tatjana Aleksić**, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor | **Edit András**, Institute of Art History, Research Centre for the Humanities at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest | **Lucjan Bedeni**, Marubi National Museum of Photography, Albania | **Sara Blaylock**, University of California, Santa Cruz | **Masha Chlenova**, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam | **Eda Ćufer**, Maine College of Art, Portland | **April Eisman**, Iowa State University, Ames | **Devin Fore**, Princeton University, NJ | **Anthony Gardner**, University of Oxford, United Kingdom | **Maria Gough**, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. | **Boris Groys**, New York University | **Sarah James**, University College London | **Christina Kiaer**, Northwestern University, Chicago | **Vladimir Kulić**, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton | **Maria Lanko**, independent | **Simon Mraz**, Austrian cultural attaché in Moscow | **Gleb Naprenko**, independent | **Kristin Romberg**, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## 2018

**Artists:** Olaf Nicolai | **Dan Perjovschi** | **Alexandra Pirici** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** **Stephanie Barron**, Los Angeles County Museum of Art | **Aleksandar Bošković**, Columbia University, New York | **Branislav Jakovljević**, Stanford University, Calif. | **Paul Kaiser**, Technische Universität Dresden | **Pavle Levi**, Stanford University, California | **Claudia Mesch**, Arizona State University, Tempe | **Benjamin Robinson**, Indiana University, Bloomington | **Łukasz Stanek**, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

**MoMA traveling team, 2010:** **Christophe Cherix**,  
The Robert Lehman Foundation Chief Curator,  
Department of Drawings and Prints | **Kim Conaty**,  
former Assistant Curator, Department of Drawings  
and Prints | **Michelle Elligott**, Chief of Archives,  
Library, and Research Collections | **Jon Hendricks**,  
Fluxus Consulting Curator, Department of  
Drawings and Prints | **Juliet Kinchin**, Curator,  
Department of Architecture and Design |  
**Barbara London**, former Associate Curator,  
Department of Media and Performance Art |  
**Roxana Marcoci**, Senior Curator, Department of  
Photography | **Christian Rattémeyer**, Associate  
Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints |  
**David Senior**, former Senior Bibliographer, Library  
| **Gretchen Wagner**, former Assistant Curator,  
Department of Drawings and Prints

**MoMA traveling team, 2012:** **Christophe Cherix** |  
**Michelle Elligott** | **Jon Hendricks** | **Juliet**  
**Kinchin** | **Barbara London** | **Roxana Marcoci** |  
**Magdalena Moskalewicz**, former Andrew W.  
Mellon Postdoctoral C-MAP Fellow, International  
Program | **Paulina Pobocho**, Associate Curator,  
Department of Painting and Sculpture | **David Senior**  
| **Gretchen Wagner**

● VILNIUS

● BERLIN

● WARSAW

● LODZ

● PRAGUE

● VIENNA

● BUDAPEST

● ZAGREB

● NOVI SAD

● BELGRADE

● BUCHAREST

**PRAGUE** **Artist:** Milan Knížák **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Helena Koenigsmarková, Museum of Decorative Arts | Pavlína Morganová, Academy of Fine Arts | Petr Nedoma, Galerie Rudolfinum | Tomáš Pospiszyl, Academy of Performing Art | Leoš Válka, DOX Center for Contemporary Art | Tomáš Vilček, National Gallery | Radim Vondráček, Museum of Decorative Arts

**WARSAW** **Artist:** Zofia Kulik **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Wiesław Borowski, Foksal Gallery | Katarzyna Krysiak, Foksal Gallery | Joanna Mytkowska, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw | Paweł Polit, Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art | Anka Ptaszkowska, Edward Krasinski Studio | Łukasz Ronduda, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw | Anda Rottenberg, Zachęta National Gallery of Art | Piotr Rypson, National Museum | Milada Śližińska, Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art | Lech Stangret, Foksal Gallery | Michał Woliński, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw

**LODZ** **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Jarosław Lubiak, Muzeum Sztuki | Józef Robakowski, ATLAS Sztuki Gallery | Jarosław Suchan, Muzeum Sztuki

**BUDAPEST** **Artists:** Orshi Drozdik | Dóra Maurer | Tamás St.Auby **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Kata Balázs, Ludwig Museum | László Beke, Research Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences | György Galántai, Artpool Art Research Center | Julia Klaniczay, Artpool Art Research Center | Emese Kürti, Ludwig Museum | Livia Paldi, Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle | Gábor Pataki, Research Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences | Miklós Peternák, Hungarian University of Fine Arts | János Sugár, Hungarian University of Fine Arts | Annamária Szőke, Eötvös Loránd University

**ZAGREB** **Artists:** Aleksandar Battista Ilić | Sanja Iveković | Ivana Keser | Ivan Kožarić | Andreja Kulunčić | Mladen Stilinović | Goran Trbuljak **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Nada Beroš, MSU | Tihomir Milovac, MSU | Snježana Pintarić, MSU | Branka Stipančić, independent | Jadranka Vinterhalter, MSU | What, How and for Whom (WHW)

**VIENNA** **Artists:** Günter Brus | VALIE EXPORT **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Sabine Folie, Generali Foundation | Achim Hochdörfer, MUMOK | Doris Leutgeb, Generali Foundation | Sylvia Liska, Vienna Secession | Susanne Neuberger, MUMOK | Walter Seidl, ERSTE Foundation

**BUCHAREST** **Artists:** Geta Brătescu | Călin Dan | Ion Grigorescu | Iosif Kiraly | Dan Perjovschi | Lia Perjovschi **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Ruxandra Balaci, National Museum of Art of Romania | Anne Barlow, Bucharest Biennale (BB5) | Adrian Guță, National University of Art | Valentina Iancu, National Museum of Art of Romania | Răzvan Ion, Bucharest Biennale (BB5) | Erwin Kessler, Romanian Academy | Anca Oroveanu, National University of Art | Mihai Oroveanu, National Museum of Art of Romania | Eugen Rădescu, Bucharest Biennale (BB5) | Alina Șerban, Center for Visual Introspection

**VILNIUS** **Artists:** Robertas Antinis | Eugenijus Cukermanas | Arturas Jevdokimovas | Česlovas Lukenskas (Česius) | Dainius Liskevicius | Darius Mikšys | Deimantas Narkevičius | Mindaugas Navakas **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Lolita Jablonskienė, National Gallery of Art | Virginija Januškevičiūtė, CAC (Contemporary Art Center) | Raminta Jurėnaitė, Vilnius Academy of Arts | Kęstutis Kuizinas, CAC (Contemporary Art Center) | Elona Lubytė, National Gallery of Art | Ieva Mazūraitė-Novickienė, National Gallery of Art | Artūras Raila, Vilnius Academy of Arts | Skaidra Trilupaitytė, Lithuanian Culture Research Institute | Dovilė Tumpytė, National Gallery of Art | The MoMA C-MAP team also met with Vytautas Landsbergis, member of the European Parliament, and Artūras Zuokas, mayor of Vilnius. The team was joined in Vilnius by Jarosław Suchan of Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz.

**BELGRADE** **Artist:** Raša Todosijević **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Ješa Denegri, independent | Branislav Dimitrijević, independent | Zoran Erić, Museum of Contemporary Art | Dejan Sretenović, Museum of Contemporary Art | Miško Šuvaković, University of Arts | Biljana Tomić, independent | Jelena Vesić, independent | Branko Vučićević, independent | Dragica Vukadinović, Student Cultural Center | Stevan Vuković, Student Cultural Center

**NOVI SAD** **Artists:** Slavko Bogdanović | Božidar Mandić | Predrag Sidjanin | Bálint Szombathy | Andrej Tišma | Slobodan Tišma | Predrag Vranešević | Želimir Žilnik **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Ivana Bašičević, Ilija Mangelos Foundation | Nebojša Milenković, Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina | Zoran Pantelić, kuda.org

**BERLIN** **Artist:** Ursula Block **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Wulf Herzogenrath, Akademie der Künste | Henriette Huldisch, Hamburger Bahnhof | Udo Kittelmann, Hamburger Bahnhof | Wilma Lukatsch, Tomas Schmidt Archive | Susanne Rennert, independent | Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, Freie Universität | Petra Stegmann, independent | Barbara Wien, Tomas Schmidt Archive | The MoMA C-MAP team also met with artists included in the 2012 Berlin Biennale.

**MoMA traveling team, 2013:** Ana Janevski,  
Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art |  
**Magdalena Moskalewicz** | **Christian Rattemeyer**

**MoMA traveling team, 2014:** Michelle Elligott |  
**Paul Galloway**, Study Center Supervisor, Department  
of Architecture and Design | **Jon Hendricks** |  
**Milan Hughston**, former Chief of Archives, Library,  
and Research Collections | **Ana Janevski** |  
**Juliet Kinchin** | **Roxana Marcoci** | **Magdalena  
Moskalewicz**

**MoMA traveling team, 2015:** Sara Bodinson,  
Director, Interpretation, Research, and Digital  
Learning | **Kim Conaty** | **Michelle Elligott** |  
**Jon Hendricks** | **Juliet Kinchin** | **Jay Levenson**,  
Director, International Program | **Roxana Marcoci**  
| **Magdalena Moskalewicz** | **Ksenia Nouril**, former  
C-MAP Fellow for Central and Eastern European  
Art, International Program | **David Platzker**, former  
Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints

MOSCOW ●

● BERLIN

● WROCLAW

● PRAGUE

● BRNO

● BRATISLAVA

● BUDAPEST

LJUBLJANA ●

● ZAGREB

● NOVI SAD

● BELGRADE



**BELGRADE Artists:** Škart **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Ješa Denegri, independent | Zoran Erić, Museum of Contemporary Art | Dejan Sretenović, Museum of Contemporary Art | Biljana Tomić, independent | Dragica Vukadinović, Student Cultural Center | Stevan Vuković, Student Cultural Center

**NOVI SAD Artist:** Bogdana Poznanović **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Luka Kulić, Museum of Vojvodina | Zoran Pantelić, kuda.org

**LJUBLJANA Artists:** IRWIN **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Zdenka Badovinac, Moderna Galerija | Alenka Gregorič, City Art Gallery | Tevž Logar, Galerija Škuc | Igor Španjol, Moderna Galerija

**ZAGREB Artists:** Damir Očko | Mladen Stilinović **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Nada Beroš, MSU | Sarah Gotovac, Tomislav Gotovac Foundation | Zora Gotovac, Tomislav Gotovac Foundation | Jasna Jakšić, MSU | Tihomir Milovac, MSU | Darko Šimičić, Tomislav Gotovac Foundation | Janka Vukmir, Institute of Contemporary Art | What, How and for Whom (WHW)

## 2014

**BUDAPEST Artists:** Katalin Keserü | Katalin Ladik | Dóra Maurer | Tamás St. Auby | Árpád Szabados **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** László Beke, Research Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences | Barnabas Bencsik, independent | György Galántai, Artpool Art Research Center | Dora Hegyi, tranzit.hu | Julia Klaniczay, Artpool Art Research Center | Emese Kürti, Ludwig Museum | Attila Pócze, Vintage Gallery | Katalin Szekely, independent | Sándor Szilagyi, Miklós Erdély Estate | Krisztina Szipócs, Ludwig Museum | János Szoboszlai, Lajos Kassák Museum | Annamaria Szőke, Miklós Erdély Estate | Katalin Szőke, Lajos Kassák Museum | Katalin Timár, Ludwig Museum | Hedvig Turai, independent

**BRATISLAVA Artists:** Milan Adamčiak | Lubomír Ďurček | Stano Masar | Monogramista T. D. | Michal Murin | Roman Ondak | Štefan Papčo | Rudolf Sikora | Dezider Tóth | Jana Želibská **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Judit Angel, tranzit.sk | Daniela Čarná, Comenius University | Juraj Čarný, SPACE Gallery | Richard Gregor, independent | Lucia Gregorová, Slovak National Gallery | Daniel Grúň, Academy of Fine Arts and Design | Mira Keratová, Central Slovakian Gallery | Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, Bratislava City Gallery | Mária Orišková, independent | Nina Vrbanová, Cyprián Majerník Gallery

**BRNO Artists:** Vladimír Havlík | Barbara Klímová | J. H. Kocman **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Iveta Černá, Villa Tugendhat | Jan Press, Moravian Gallery | Marta Sylvestrová, Moravian Gallery |

Kateřina Tlachová, Moravian Gallery | Jan Zálešák, Brno University of Technology | Tomáš Zapletal, Moravian Gallery

**PRAGUE Artists:** Zbyněk Baladrán | Milan Grygar | Milan Knížák | Maria Knížáková | Jiří Kovanda | Květa Pacovská | Jan Šágl **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Vít Havránek, tranzit.org | Camille Hunt, hunt kastner gallery | Iva Janáková-Knobloch, Museum of Decorative Arts | Katherine Kastner, hunt kastner gallery | Pavlína Morganová, Academy of Fine Arts | Tomáš Pospiszył, Academy of Performing Art

**WROCŁAW Artist:** Natalia LL **Curator:** Dorota Monkiewicz, Wrocław Contemporary Museum

**BERLIN Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Juan A. Gaitán, Berlin Biennale | Gabriele Horn, KW Institute for Contemporary Art/Berlin Biennale | The MoMA C-MAP team also met with artists included in the 2014 Berlin Biennale. The team was joined in Berlin by Jarosław Suchan of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź.

## 2015

**MOSCOW Artists:** Yuri Albert | Nikita Alekseev | Victor Alimpiev | Sergey Bratkov | Olga Chernysheva | Chto Delat | Elena Elagina | Alexandra Galkina | Dmitri Green | Dmitry Gutov | Polina Kanis | Irina Korina | Igor Makarevich | Taus Makhacheva | Andrei Monastyrski | Anton Nikolaev | Anna Parkina | Igor Shelkovsky | Sveta Shuvaeva | Haim Sokol | David Ter-Oganyan | Alisa Yoffe | Vadim Zakharov | Arseny Zhilyaev **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Anna Arutyunyan, Moscow Museum of Modern Art | Joseph Backstein, Institute of Contemporary Art | Ilya Budraitskis, independent | Ketí Chukhrov, Russian State University of the Humanities | Ekaterina Degot, Academy of Arts of the World, Cologne | Andrey Egorov, Moscow Museum of Modern Art | Ekaterina Iragui, Iragui Gallery | Pavel Kuznetsov, Melnikov House | Yelizaveta Likhacheva, Melnikov House | Vladimir Logutov, The Foundation of Vladimir Smirnov and Konstantin Sorokin | Teresa Iarocci Mavica, V-A-C Foundation | Leonid Mikhelson, V-A-C Foundation | Andrey Misiano, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art | Alexey Novoselov, Moscow Museum of Modern Art | Parviz Rizlov, XL Gallery | Kira Sacarello-Tsereteli, Moscow Museum of Modern Art | Kirill Svetlyakov, New State Tretyakov Gallery | Olga Sviblova, Multimedia Art Museum/House of Photography | Alexander Tikhonov, Moscow Museum of Modern Art | Nadia Totskaya, Regina Gallery | Zelfira Tregulova, New State Tretyakov Gallery | Vasili Tsereteli, Moscow Museum of Modern Art | Anna Zaitseva, Multimedia Art Museum/House of Photography | Evgeniya Zubchenko, The Foundation of Vladimir Smirnov and Konstantin Sorokin | Anna Zykina, The Foundation of Vladimir Smirnov and Konstantin Sorokin



**MoMA traveling team, 2016:** Sara Bodinson |  
Michelle Elligott | Jon Hendricks | Ana Janevski |  
Juliet Kinchin | Jay Levenson | Sarah Lookofsky,  
Assistant Director, International Program |  
Roxana Marcoci | Ksenia Nouril | Erik Patton,  
Director, Exhibition Planning and Administration |  
David Platzker | Paulina Pobochoa | Christian  
Rattemeyer | David Senior

**MoMA traveling team, 2017:** Sara Bodinson |  
Michelle Elligott | Samantha Friedman, Associate  
Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints |  
Jon Hendricks | Laura Hoptman, Curator, Department  
of Painting and Sculpture | Ana Janevski |  
Juliet Kinchin | Jay Levenson | Maria Marchenkova,  
Assistant Editor, Publications | Roxana Marcoci |  
Ksenia Nouril | Erik Patton | David Platzker |  
Paulina Pobochoa | David Senior

MOSCOW ●

● BERLIN

● WARSAW

● LODZ



**WARSAW Artists:** Zofia Kulik | Teresa Murak | Janek Simon | Monika Sosnowska | Radek Szlaga  
**Art historians, curators, and scholars:**  
 Sebastian Cichocki, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw | David Crowley, Royal College of Art, London | Marta Dziewańska, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw | Zuzanna Hadryś, Stereo Gallery | Michał Jachula, Le Guern Gallery | Dorota Jarecka, Studio Gallery | Robert Jarosz, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw | Magdalena Kobus, Raster Gallery | Magdalena Komornicka, Zachęta National Gallery of Art | Joanna Kordjak, Zachęta National Gallery of Art | Katarzyna Krysiak, Foksal Gallery | Michał Lasota, Stereo Gallery | Adam Mazur, *Szum* magazine | Joanna Mytkowska, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw | Barbara Piwowarska, Studio Gallery | Andrzej Przywara, Foksal Gallery Foundation | Piotr Rypson, National Museum | Aleksandra Ściegienna, Foksal Gallery Foundation | Milada Slizinska, Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art | Agata Smoczyńska-Le Guern, Le Guern Gallery | Justyna Wesołowska, Foksal Gallery

**ŁÓDŹ Artist:** Tamás Kaszás **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Maciej Cholewiński, Muzeum Sztuki | Maria Franecka, Muzeum Sztuki | Jerzy Grzegorski, Wschodnia Gallery | Adam Klimczak, Wschodnia Gallery | Paulina Kurc-Maj, Muzeum Sztuki | Maria Morzuch, Muzeum Sztuki | Daniel Muzyczuk, Muzeum Sztuki | Paweł Polić, Muzeum Sztuki | Anna Saciuk-Gąsowska, Muzeum Sztuki | Katarzyna Słoboda, Muzeum Sztuki | Joanna Sokołowska, Muzeum Sztuki | Jarosław Suchan, Muzeum Sztuki | Łukasz Zarembaat, Muzeum Sztuki

**BERLIN Artists:** Paweł Althamer | DIS | Basim Magdy | Ewa Partum | Adrian Piper | Hito Steyerl | Wolfgang Tillmans **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Maria Betegon, Gregor Podnar Gallery | René Block, Edition Block | Karen Boros, Boros Collection | Monika Branicka, Żak Branicka Gallery | Jennifer Chert, Chert Gallery | Isabella Czarnowska, Isabella Czarnowska Gallery | Marion Fricke, M + R Fricke Gallery | Roswitha Fricke, M + R Fricke Gallery | Gabriele Horn, KW Institute for Contemporary Art/Berlin Biennale | Bojana Pejić, independent | Asia Žak Persons, Żak Branicka Gallery | Gregor Podnar, Gregor Podnar Gallery | Rachel Rits-Volloch, Kunstquartier Bethanien | Anda Rottenberg, independent | Julia Stoschek, Julia Stoschek Collection | Christoph Tannert, Künstlerhaus Bethanien | The MoMA C-MAP team also met with artists included in the 2016 Berlin Biennale.

**MOSCOW Artists:** Yuri Albert | Elena Elagina | Georgy Kiesewalter | Igor Makarevich | Taus Makhacheva | Natalia Melikova | Roman Minaev | Andrei Monastyrski | Ostengruppe | Haim Sokol | Aleksandr Zaitcev **Art historians, curators, and scholars:** Ari Akkermans, journalist | Kristina Barekryan, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts | Ilya Budraitskis, independent | Danil Bulatov, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts | Keti Chukhrov, Russian State University of the Humanities | Olga Dementieva, National Centre for Contemporary Arts | Valentin Diaconov, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art | Olga Druzhinina, Moscow Design Museum | Polina Filimonova, V-A-C Foundation | Teresa Iarocci Mavica, V-A-C Foundation | Evgeniya Kiseleva, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts | Anastasia Kurlyandtseva, State Tretyakov Gallery | Vladimir Logutov, The Foundation of Vladimir Smirnov and Konstantin Sorokin | Andrey Misiano, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art | Viktor Misiano, independent | Gleb Naprenko, independent | Nadia Plungyan, independent | Alisa Prudnikova, Ekaterinburg branch of the National Centre for Contemporary Arts and the Ural Industrial Biennial | Alexandra Sankova, Moscow Design Museum | Andrey Shental, independent | Egor Sofronov, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art | Anna Trapkov, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts | Yulia Vorotyntseva, State Tretyakov Gallery | Evgeniya Zubchenko, The Foundation of Vladimir Smirnov and Konstantin Sorokin | Anna Zykina, The Foundation of Vladimir Smirnov and Konstantin Sorokin

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If 1989 marked a turning point in the history of contemporary art, then Europe after the collapse of the Berlin Wall stands as one of its great crucibles. Nowhere is that narrative clearer than in this indispensable volume, which traces the debates, dilemmas, flows, and fortunes of art- and exhibition-making that have made postsocialist Europe so central to contemporary art history. It is a treasure trove of documents, each sensitively chosen to chart the breadth and acuity of contemporary art in Central and Eastern Europe, and an inspired addition to MoMA's superb Primary Documents series.

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In the context of global art that has come to prevail, it is vital to take a closer look at the changing parameters of art and theory of Central and Eastern Europe. This major book, with its rich collection of texts, offers not only a critical approach toward postsocialist art, but also a profound understanding of the current conditions.

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This book stands as an essential resource for those interested in the expanding view of modernism and its global permutations in the post-1989 art world. Shattering the notion of chronologies that produce degrees of “originality” or “belated influence” and asking instead that we recognize the full complexity and diversity of cultural production in the former East, it changes the ground for understanding what global practices in the visual arts might mean today, eloquently speaking for endless variations of dialogue and mutual engagement.

— **Jane A. Sharp**, Associate Professor of Art History and Research Curator of the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union at Rutgers University

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